NOVEL 3

WRITTEN BY
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I'M THE EVIL LORD OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPIRE

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"Aaaaaaaaah!!! I imagined iiiiit!!!"
Why do you keep getting between Liam and Kurt? If you're in the picture, I can't help but imagine all sorts of terrible scenarios! Ohh, Liam or Kurt is going to be stolen—
KURT
LIAM
EILA
?
WALLACE

"You cur! How shameless can you be?"
Wearing the white dress I'd ordered for our engagement ceremony, Rosetta glared at me.
"That expression of yours is ruining the effect of your beautiful dress. How about acting a little happier, huh?"
"I can't wait!"
"As long as you are enjoying yourself, Master."
ROSETTA
AMAGI

"It's no use fleeing. Now, let's continue. You guys had better entertain me, like your lives depend on it!"
BFC-X001LSC-[G]
AVID MK II
HEAVY GROUND TYPE

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YOMU MISHIMA

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

IN THE CENTER of a rotunda-like research lab stood a great many stone statues in the form of human beings—or rather, they were petrified people that resembled statues. Hundreds of them had been grouped there, frozen with expressions of agony on their faces; some even with expressions of hatred.

Moving purposefully among the statues were researchers in white lab coats and mages in robes. All sorts of equipment had been set up around the statues, and the researchers and mages rushed hurriedly from instrument to instrument.

I, Liam Sera Banfield, watched all this from an elevated walkway.

"When they awaken, I wonder what sort of people they'll be?"

Not long ago, I exterminated some pirates who plagued the domain of a friend of mine, Kurt Sera Exner. Among the treasures I'd liberated from those pirates were these petrified people.

I had no idea how or why they'd been petrified, but they'd at least been gifted with one mercy at the time of their petrification. Or perhaps it was a curse. Whichever way you look at it, their consciousnesses had been bound to their petrified bodies, so even after hundreds of years had passed, their minds remained intact. Still able to think even after having been turned to stone, theirs was a living death.

For whatever reason, someone had gone to the trouble of petrifying these people and inflicting these people with this terrible curse, but I was equally determined to revive them.

As I looked down with interest at the scene below me, Amagi stood by my side in a traditional maid outfit. She looked exactly like a beautiful—if expressionless—woman, but she was actually a robot. Her otherwise classic uniform had the odd touch of baring her shoulders, and each shoulder bore a mark that identified her as a man-made creation.

Amagi's eyes with their brilliant red irises gazed down at the petrified people, as well. She said, "Are you really going to free them, Master? Not only were these people petrified, but they were inflicted with a curse as well. There must have been a reason that someone would do such a thing. Are you not concerned that freeing them might prove dangerous?"

Maybe Amagi was right. If they turned out to be bad people, then freeing them would be a mistake, but I was just too intrigued to resist. I was curious as to what sort of evil deeds could lead to such an extreme punishment.

"I just want to hear their side of the story. Don't worry; if they act up when they're released, I'll protect you." I lifted the sword I wore at my waist, and Amagi narrowed her eyes slightly with what I assumed was amusement.

"And if you cannot handle them, Master?"

“If I die here, then I die here.”
From an outsider’s perspective, maybe my response would sound rather philosophical, but I never felt like I was in any danger. After all, I had a guardian angel in the “Guide.” In my past life, I was betrayed and went through hell, but the Guide offered me salvation. He reincarnated me in this world and had even been providing me with follow-up service all this time. In fact, I even wondered if this very scenario was a present from him.
Amagi was clearly concerned about me, but she didn’t press the fact and turned her eyes back toward the statues.
“The petrification is starting to come undone.”
“This is exciting.”
Just what sort of people are they? Finding that out alone will make freeing them worth it.
The mages chanted their spells, and layers of curses that had been imprinted into the statues were stripped away. Meanwhile, someone made an announcement over the intercom.
“Now administering elixirs!”
Elixirs were mysterious cure-all drugs that had to be used very carefully, and so the whole lab area filled with a nervous tension. These mysterious concoctions were incredibly expensive, since even in this intergalactic empire they couldn’t be mass-produced. Countless icicle-like objects formed of these elixirs were lowered from the ceiling. When they touched the statues, they broke apart and turned to liquid, which spread across the stone. Researchers in lab coats watched over the process, administering other drugs at appropriate intervals.
The statues began to change color, and then stone started to crack and fall away in chunks. Human beings emerged from within these husks, all of them naked. The statues had appeared to be wearing clothes, but their garments must have crumbled away along with the stony material.
Once released, the freed humans all dropped weakly to their knees, looking themselves over. Some of them cried in elation at being able to move their bodies, while a number of them spotted me observing them and simply stared in my direction. Some appeared wary, others were afraid, and some inscrutable…but just one of them looked up at me and reached out her hands.
The woman who reached up to me had lilac hair and matching eyes. While some—well, most—of the released people seemed to be shouldering a heavy, persisting darkness, this woman instead seemed to give off a kind of radiance.
Amagi had just received a report from the mages and she related the current situation to me. “They appear to be barely conscious, but they seemed to understand when it was explained to them that you are the one responsible for freeing them.”
When I heard this, I’m sure I had quite the smug smile on my face. “Well, that’s convenient. If they feel like they owe me, I can make use of them.”

I snickered, and Amagi tilted her head, perplexed. Her expression never really changed, but I felt like I could read her emotions from her slight changes in demeanor.
“Wh-what?” I asked.
“Nothing. I simply had the impression that you are enjoying this. In any case, having just been freed, these people must be disoriented, if not traumatized. They will likely require psychological treatment and recuperation for some time.”
I looked down at the lilac-haired woman who stared up at me. Her eyes almost looked empty. There were also a lot of people who were pallid, their skin almost a dark blue.
“Begin their treatment right away. When they’ve recovered, we’ll question them and find out who they are and where they’re from. We need to find out *why* they were petrified, don’t we?”
“Very well.” Amagi turned to some others to relay my orders.
With this operation having completed, I crossed my arms and considered what I wanted to do next. “I’m running out of time before I start primary school. Maybe it’s time to break open my ‘piggy bank.’”
Once I started school, I wouldn’t be free to do whatever I wanted for quite a while. I decided I’d better line my pockets a little while I had the chance.
Amagi gave me a curious look. “Piggy bank? I was not aware you had one, Master.”
“Not on me, no. But do I have many of them.” I looked up at the domed ceiling and spread my arms. “Launch our ships! And be sure to load the Avid onto the Vár, too!”
The Avid was my personal mobile knight, a weapon with a humanoid form standing twenty-four meters tall, entirely black, and with massive shields mounted on both shoulders.
The Vár was a superdreadnought, a ship thousands of meters long that commanded a fleet numbering in the tens of thousands as its flagship. Basically, it was a really incredible battleship; so incredible that there was an entire *town* living inside of it. This feature of superdreadnoughts made little sense to me, but I supposed it was kind of like a mobile space colony. Sure, I indulged and spent a vast sum of money to have it built, but such indulgence was a privilege that evil lords like myself should enjoy! I could take my subjects’ hard-earned tax money and throw it around on whatever I so desired. If that wasn’t evil, I didn’t know what was.
With all that tax money, I intended to engage in the most foolish act of all: war. Though, in truth, you couldn’t really call what I was about to start a *real* war. It would be more like a one-sided slaughter. After all, my military and I were incredibly strong.

***

This world I'd been reborn into had a certain something called space pirates—villains who carried out their dirty work amongst the stars.

These pirates operated out of fortresses, most of which were repurposed satellites that had already been mined for resources, and they hid their ill-gotten treasures in these home bases. Their forts tended to be heavily armed to make them more easily defendable, but they were nonetheless little more than "piggy banks" to me.

From the bridge of the Vár, my entirely too-huge space battleship, I watched the battle play out. My ships, the fleet of House Banfield, were presently attacking another such pirate fortress. My tens of thousands of ships fired a barrage of energy beams along with some more traditional weapons, shaving away at the fortress' defenses. It would be clear even to a layman that my side had the overwhelming advantage.

The operators on the bridge reported the state of the battle to me.

"Our mobile knight force has infiltrated the enemy fortress."

"Infiltration route secured. Sending in the landing force."

When my troops had successfully invaded the asteroid fortress, I rose from my seat and gave my order. "Prepare the Avid, and ready the usual crew."

All the military officers on the bridge stood from their seats and saluted me. It was quite a sight, considering that even though I'd grown some in the years since becoming their lord, I still looked like I was only a teenager.

"The Avid is ready for launch, sir," said the commander.

I gave him a villainous smile. "It's almost time for me to head off to school. I gotta cut loose while I can." I said it as casually as if I were taking a day off from work for a little joyride in a different car.

I didn't battle with these space pirates because I hated them, or for the sake of justice, or anything else like that. I just did it because it was who I was. It's not always allies of justice who take down domineering villains; sometimes it's bigger villains—like me! This was basically a hobby for me, and one I could profit from at the same time, which made it all that much more fun.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how much treasure these pirates have saved up for me."

Space pirates diligently built up their fortunes and then I came and took it all from them. That's why I call their fortresses my piggy banks.

***

With my advance teams having breached the enemy fortress, I infiltrated in the Avid myself and was "entertaining" the defensive forces with my machine's bare hands. These robotic hands were called manipulators and were supposed to be precision machinery intended for delicate work. Normally, one wouldn't fight with them, but my Avid was something special.

"Come on, what's wrong? Put up more of a fight!" I cried out.

I squeezed the head of an enemy mobile knight, crushing it easily in my manipulator. Even a big lump of metal was like putty in the hands of the Avid. I just couldn't get enough of its fearsome power.

Wreckage from enemy mobile knights and other weapons floated nearby in the gravity-free environment. When I finished with my current target, I tossed it away from me.

"I heard this group had five thousand ships, but they didn't prove to be much of a threat."

While I was lamenting the fact that I wasn't enjoying myself this time as much as I'd hoped, one of my guards leapt in front of the Avid.

"Please fall back, Lord Liam!"

The guard who'd come forward to protect me was sent flying by an enemy attack. Only elite knights were tasked with guarding me, so whoever had batted him away had to be formidable.

Standing before me now was a humanoid weapon piloted by a pirate who had once been a knight. Knights were fighters who underwent arduous physical and martial training in order to become far superior to the average soldier. They were valuable military assets but were also expensive to recruit. In the end, some of these knights ended up becoming pirates. But, well, I didn't really have anything against pirate knights.

The knight leapt at me with a live sword gripped in one manipulator. From his movements, I could tell that he was stronger than the enemies I'd fought up until now. If he took out one of my guards, he had to be a decent pilot too. On top of that, his modified mobile knight looked new, on par with a machine like the Nemain models.

"Your days are numbered, Pirate Hunter Liam! There's a bounty on your head in our world!"

In many intergalactic empires, bounties were placed on especially dangerous pirates' heads. Due to my reputation as a pirate hunter, the pirates had apparently placed a bounty on *me* as well.

I guess I'm wanted in the space pirate world. Well, that's fantastic!

I spun one of the Avid's shields around and deflected a blow from the knight's sword. Sparks flew from the impact.

"First I've heard of it. How much is the bounty?"

"Laugh while you can, boy! Soon, the Family will—"

When the pirate knight seemed to think better of his words and fell silent. I lost interest and kicked his unit aside.

I gripped a laser blade in the Avid's right hand. "Time's up. Well, you entertained me somewhat."

I wanted to hear how much the bounty on me was, but since he wouldn't tell me, I cut him down.

I noticed something odd. "Something's wrong with the Avid."

I performed a check on the craft's right arm, and the results indicated a malfunction. The issue was with the joints, and this wasn't the first time it had happened.

“Again? I just had maintenance done on this thing.”
When I moved the arm, it discharged flickers of electricity. I apparently overburdened it.
“Is Nias slacking off?”
Nias was an engineering captain in the Seventh Weapons Factory, charged with maintaining the Avid. She was a brilliant engineer but was otherwise a complete waste of a pretty face. She wasn’t really the type to cut corners on her work though… I’d given her plenty of time and funds to maintain the Avid, so it was unlikely this was due to her slacking off or something. Still, since I’d had this problem multiple times, I couldn’t help but get angry about it.
“I’m gonna talk to her when I get back.”
I soon found my people had finished cleaning up the enemies, and they came to await further orders from me. Fortunately, the pilot in that guard unit that had been sent flying proved to be uninjured, and he addressed me.
“Lord Liam, Special Landing Force Treasure has arrived.”
“Excellent! All right, let the hunt begin!”
I decided to leave the issue with the Avid for later and dismounted from the cockpit. Heading outside, I met with the team I’d put together specifically for treasure hunting. “*Special Landing Force Treasure” kinda reminds me of a* tokusatsu *show I watched as a kid. Well, all they really are is an elite unit.* This special force would be able to deal with any situation we ran into while treasure hunting. *Yeah…“special force” is the kind of phrase that gets any boy’s blood pumping!*
“Let’s find us some treasure! Look alive, men!”
“Yes, sir!”
Lined up before me, the team members saluted and then dispersed into the zero gravity area, setting off to begin the hunt and plunder the enemy fortress. This fortress itself, the wreckage from the vanquished space pirates—all of it would become my profit. Hence, why I thought of pirates as being an extension of my wallet.

***

Relatively speaking, there hadn’t been a lot in this piggy bank, but it was enough for a nice little profit.
After returning to my mansion, I was walking along a hallway with my butler, Brian Beaumont. Generally he was a good-natured old man, but right now, he was frowning and boldly offering me his own opinions.
“Master Liam, have you really been calling space pirate fortresses ‘piggy banks’? Here I thought this was part of some cute side to you, but oh, how I was wrong!”
He probably thought I was referring to an actual piggy bank of some sort, but this whole domain constituted my assets. What need did I have for a literal thing like that?

“Not my fault you got the wrong idea.”
“Anyone would think the same!”
As I considered myself a villain, I really only wanted to be surrounded by yes-men. I didn’t want to have to deal with people who would defy me. But since Brian had been serving House Banfield for many long years and held the important position of butler, he managed everything relating to the mansion where I lived. I couldn’t easily dismiss him. This was why I let him talk back to me a bit, as much as that annoyed me.
He continued griping at me. “I mean, who says, ‘I’m off to go break my piggy bank,’ and then mobilizes the army?!”
“It’s my army! What’s wrong with me using it when I want to?”
I turned away from Brian, but he hurried around to my other side to remain in my line of sight.
“You have done quite enough fighting already. Please do not go out on the front lines anymore! I cannot sleep at night, I’m so worried about you!”
I could imagine how fed up I must have looked with this old man hounding me as he wiped away his tears with a handkerchief.
“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be heading off to school soon, anyway. Just make sure to send the Avid to the Seventh Weapons Factory, all right?”
“It has already been arranged.” When I mentioned school, Brian’s crying switched to tears of happiness. “I can’t believe you’re finally old enough to attend primary school, Master Liam. I’m so happy I could cry.”
“You’re always crying.”
Primary school was where the noble children of the Algrand Empire went to receive the next phase of their education. Only a select elite could attend, but due to the massive size of the intergalactic empire, this “select few” was actually quite a large number. These children, who carried the future of the empire on their shoulders, were educated on a planet dedicated solely to this purpose. They would live on campus for six years, acquiring the knowledge, experience, and skills needed to be a noble.
Well, it was basically just a school for rich kids. You might even call it a kind of rehabilitation facility where noble brats who grew up spoiled rotten would be taught the bare minimum required for them to interact properly with other people. After all, even poorer nobles ruled over entire planets. I was sure my fellow students would prove to be a bunch of idiots who’d been raised as kings in their own territories, just as I had, who would do nothing but cause problems when they entered actual society. Primary school was meant to fix all that. What a truly pathetic place.
Brian wiped his tears away and listed my plans for the day to me. “You have many visitors again today, Master Liam. However, one of them is a bit of a problem…”
When I heard this, I stopped walking and sighed. “Not again.”

***

Philanthropy is completely worthless.
In my reception room, I sat with Amagi at my side, across from the certain visitor whom Brian had alluded to.
“So you want financial support?”
The visitor, a man in a suit with an earnest look on his face, was upper management at an organization called the Planetary Restoration Group. They worked to make the environments of planets destroyed by human hands habitable once again, and their whole operation was only possible thanks to donations from the rich.
“Yes, my lord. We would like for you to understand the work we do, and support it, if possible.”
He’d been passionately explaining his philanthropic work to me hoping to get me to cough up some cash. The current subject was just how many destroyed planets were out there.
“So many worlds have been ravaged by war and barbaric pirates. It’s not right to simply leave them as they are. Furthermore, many people from these worlds have been left homeless and wandering. Our work puts these refugees back on solid ground, on restored planets.”
Well, isn’t that just a noble attitude?
“It seems like a wonderful undertaking. I’m impressed by your ideals.”
“You’ll provide us your support, then!” The man was overjoyed, believing that I had agreed to become their patron.
“Restoring destroyed planets does indeed sound wonderful, but I will not provide you with financial aid. Never show your face here again.”
“Huh?”
I leaned back on my couch and grinned at the man. Philanthropy? The thought made me sick.
“You’re welcome to do all you want to help people, but I don’t want anything to do with you. I have no interest in your noble work.”
I would never do so now, but back in my past life whenever I saw a collection box, I would usually drop in some coins. I thought it was the right thing to do if it would help someone. But when I was suffering in my past life, I would have done anything just to get some of that change back. I yearned for any money I could get my hands on, even if it only bought me a single rice ball. But no one helped me. I tried to raise funds in whatever way I could, but no one spared even a thought for me. That was when I finally understood that philanthropy accomplished nothing but self-satisfaction.
“Frankly, I hate people like you. By all means, keep helping others so you can pat yourself on the back.”
The man was shaking, his face red with indignation. “I-is that anything for a lord praised as a wise ruler to say? I had high hopes for you!”
“Well, you can hope for whatever you’d like, but I’m under no obligation to live up to those hopes. And when did I ever call myself a wise ruler?”
“Your subjects expect great things from you. They extol your virtues, and yet this is the reality? You don’t even deserve to be called a lord!”

Is this guy an idiot?
“My subjects are just mistaken about me, and I think you’ve become rather impudent.” I glared at him, and the man began to sweat.
“Th-there are some very important nobles who wouldn’t like it if you laid a hand on me!”
There were indeed nobles who were passionate about philanthropy and had the cash to spare on it. On a pamphlet my guest had shown me, I recognized some of the names listed. It wasn’t uncommon for rich nobles to engage in charitable giving, but I wouldn’t be joining their ranks.
“You think throwing some names at me would scare me into it? This is my domain. I’m the law here. I can easily erase one man if I want to.”
No other house would defend a man who came into my domain to lecture me. If I punished him for it, they might have some stern words for me at most. Not many big-time nobles truly believed that people’s lives had real worth. To us, human lives were nothing more than numbers in a ledger. There were only a rare few who actually valued each and every individual’s life.
“As I said, help as many people as you like. I won’t complain, but I won’t give you any money. That’s all there is to it. There’s no problem with that, is there?”
When I threatened the man, the man practically fled from the room, leaving his pamphlets behind. As I watched him go, cackling, Amagi gave me an accusatory look.
“Master, I cannot approve of your demeanor toward that man.”
Normally I liked to act all high and mighty, but I had a hard time standing up to Amagi. Though she was expressionless, I knew she was mad at me, so I tried to justify my behavior.
“Don’t say that. Look, I just really hate philanthropy. You think these types do it out of the goodness of their hearts? I don’t believe that for a second. I’d be more inclined to trust someone who said they were helping people because it was beneficial to *them*.”
“You could simply have provided them with a minimum amount of support to get them to leave you alone. That would have caused you no financial burden.”
She was correct there. I was in possession of an incredible treasure—the alchemy box. It was a mysterious, amazing device that I had obtained from one of the pirate bands I’d defeated, which could transmute any kind of trash into gold. The alchemy box provided me with basically inexhaustible wealth, but regardless of this, philanthropy was something I refused to engage in.
Amagi gave me a sad look when she saw that I refused to change my attitude. “Is charity really so detestable to you?”
There were some things I wouldn’t budge on, even for her. I could never forget the suffering I went through in my past life.

“Of course it is,” I said without hesitation, but she couldn’t seem to accept my answer. In fact, she looked very confused. “What is it?”
“Well, Master, is House Banfield not already engaging in philanthropy under your very orders? You have bought a ruined planet and are in the process of restoring it right now. You have also accepted refugees who had nowhere else to go.”
True, I was doing some things similar to that charity, but I couldn’t stand to think of my actions as philanthropic.
“You call that philanthropy? It’s nothing like that. I’m just planning ahead. We’re restoring that planet and accepting refugees because they’ll become my assets. The planet and the people are all my property. Don’t act like I’m doing it out of the goodness of my heart or something.”
Amagi’s accusatory look softened and turned to something that suggested pleasure.
“What is it?”
“That thinking is very like you, Master. What about the people you have rescued from pirates? Is that not philanthropy?”
Even before that large group of petrified people, I had saved other captives from pirates who’d been tormenting them horribly. I’d even used rare elixirs for their treatment. What I’d gotten in return for the expense hadn’t matched up though, so I considered these efforts a mistake on my part.
I said, “There were a lot of lookers among the people captured by the pirates, and people with valuable skills and knowledge. It’s good to have people like that indebted to you, isn’t it? They’re assets. Plus, the good-looking ones might join my harem one day. Or maybe their kids would. They’re nothing more than an investment.”
If I saved such people and allowed them to live in my domain, they’d get married and have kids. That meant there would be even more beautiful women in the future, and my harem would become more extravagant. Welcoming these former captives had been a pretty blatant waste of resources, but I chose to live true to my desires.
“You do realize there is not a single person in this so-called ‘harem’ of yours as of yet.”
“Come on, there’s you!”
“As I have explained to you multiple times in the past, you cannot count me as a member. Thus, the number is zero. You currently have a harem with zero members. Please accept that fact.”
“There’s you, so it’s not zero! I’m the law here! It’s my rules! I won’t accept disagreement from anyone!”
How did we go from philanthropy to this?
Amagi appeared so fed up that she actually shook her head, but she then relented and moved on to the next thing on my schedule.
“Your next meeting is with the new representative from the Third Weapons Factory.”
“New representative? What happened to Eulisia?”

The Third Weapons Factory had always been represented by Eulisia, a waste of a pretty face just like Nias of the Seventh Weapons Factory. I found it strange that they would give someone else the position though.
“She has entered a military academy for retraining.”
“Retraining? Does she really need that?”
In this world, the military maintained schools for retraining soldiers who had already completed their education, since people lived such long lives. Once you became a soldier, it was a given you would likely need retraining in a few decades, and people took leave from active service to pursue this. It was also necessary if you were transferring to a new unit or required new skills, like if a maintenance tech went on to become a pilot. If you trained for a new skill, however, that would only lengthen your stay in the military. Education wasn’t free, so you would be expected to work that much longer to make use of those new skills. Eulisia was on active duty, so if she was retraining, was she looking to gain some new qualifications?
“I am unaware of the reason, but her training has already begun. Because of that, they have changed representatives, and the new one wishes to meet with you now.”
One of my pitiful beauties was gone. It was a bit of a pity in itself. Well, I still had Nias, and she was more than enough really.
“All right, then. Lots of meetings again today, huh?”
“These individuals wish to meet with you before you enter primary school. Once your schooling begins, it will be difficult to see you for anything but emergencies.”
Unimportant meetings would be refused while I was in school. I guess there were a lot of people lining up to meet me before then.
At that moment, I remembered something to do with primary school, and asked, “Amagi, did you send a bribe to the school?” This was a suitably villainous topic for me.
“It was not a bribe, but a donation. We have made a generous contribution, yes.”
“Same difference. Guess now I’ll be able to enjoy school, though.”
There was no formal tuition to attend the school, but nobles had their reputations to consider, so they typically made a donation of a certain amount when enrolling themselves or their offspring. Some—like me!—made *hefty* donations with the understanding that the student in question would be well accommodated when they attended.
“At least, I’ll try to enjoy my six years of school. I wonder what sort of special treatment I’ll get?”
I expected to receive a warm welcome there, thanks to my financial status. Money was everything after all, even in this world. I had instructed Amagi to be sure to donate a large sum, to ensure that I’d be treated well.
Amagi said, “I am pleased you are looking forward to it, Master.”

***

In her chambers of House Banfield's mansion, the head maid Serena sat in front of a holographic image of her true master. The one Serena actually served was not Liam, but the prime minister of the Algrand Empire. She had come to work at House Banfield at Brian's recommendation, but unbeknownst to him, she was a spy sent by the prime minister to gather information on Liam.

"I apologize for calling you like this, but allow me to get right to the point, if you would. I'd like to hear the reason for the vast amount of money House Banfield has donated to the primary school."

"His donation?"

"That's right. None of the teachers at the school know what to do. The principal came to me in tears."

"Large donations aren't such an unusual thing, are they?"

"For a regular noble, no. It's understood their donations are to ensure their children are treated well. When the money comes from Pirate Hunter Liam, however, it's a different matter."

The head maid understood what the prime minister was trying to say. "Does the primary school not know of Lord Liam's scrupulous nature? They must realize he doesn't desire special treatment."

Serena had determined through her undercover work that Liam was no enemy to the prime minister. She also judged him to be an exceedingly superior ruler, despite his youth.

"They know, and that's the problem. Because of this, they have no idea what to do with the money he provided. What do you think it means?"

"I think it's simple. Lord Liam doesn't expect special treatment, and just wants a proper education."

"Then you think so too," the prime minister said when he heard Serena's reasoning.

The head maid recalled an in-depth conversation she'd had with Liam at one point about primary school. "He was very interested when I told him that the school makes up for budget deficits with donations. He looked deep in thought when I told him many foolish nobles make large donations in order to secure special treatment. I believe he felt sympathy for the school's plight."

Nobles who were important enough received special treatment even without donations. When Liam heard that, he appeared to think about it deeply. Serena had interpreted Liam's expression to mean that he was dissatisfied with the status quo.

"Lord Liam would not desire such an environment."

"He's almost too mature for his age. How are things with him in general at the mansion?"

"Yes, sir. He begins his day with training and studying and fulfills his political responsibilities as well. I have cautioned him about his vulgar

mouth, but he requires no other modifications of his behavior. I would consider him an exemplary noble even if he weren't so young."
"He's almost too good to be true. Is there anything else of interest to report about him? He'd convey more charm if he entertained himself in some amusing way."
Serena chuckled at the prime minister's suggestion that Liam was too diligent to possess the charm of a boy his age. "You want to know if he's chatting up the mansion's maids on his breaks, like a certain someone used to do?"
"I-I was young back then. So does the count engage in any such things?" The prime minister forced the topic of conversation back to Liam.
Serena was amused by the prime minister's embarrassment over his own youth, but she wasn't sure how to answer his question. "I've asked Brian about this, but apparently Lord Liam makes no moves on the staff. Honestly, it *is* a bit of a concern, just how serious he is."
Liam seemed to take little notice of his mansion's maids, nor of the daughters of his territory's vassals who came to his domain for training. The one problem Serena could find with Liam was his issues with women. It wasn't that he fooled around too much, but that he didn't fool around at *all*.
"I see. That is curious."
"If he finds himself a girlfriend at primary school, I think everyone here would welcome her as his first wife, even if her standing wasn't very high."
"Well, I wouldn't want him getting involved with any troublesome houses. What about an arranged match?"
The prime minister was worried that if Liam married the wrong person, he might become negatively influenced by her family. Serena agreed. The two of them wanted to ensure that Liam remained an asset to the Empire.
"The problem is that even if Liam's personal reputation is good, House Banfield has earned very little trust due to its history. Most houses would think twice about a match with him."
They had tried to arrange a match for Liam, but his father and grandfather had been such terrible lords that other houses still wanted little to do with House Banfield. There was no issue with Liam's own reputation, but no one wanted to join their families together because of the past. They hoped that as Liam continued to make a name for himself, particularly once his education was completed, houses that were on the fence about him might begin to think differently about making a match.
In this world with its extensive lifespans, a fifty-year track record didn't mean much. Maybe when Liam had at least a hundred years under his belt he would start receiving requests for marriage interviews. This was proof positive of just how badly regarded his father and grandfather had been.
"That's unfortunate, but I don't know how I'd feel about joining hands with his house, either, if I was them. After all, that's why I sent you to evaluate him."

Serena was undercover at House Banfield to ascertain whether Liam should be won over or ignored by the Empire.

As he mulled over matters pertaining to Liam, the prime minister's expression darkened. "I know you're concerned with the marriage issue, but there is something else I want you to be mindful of. His Highness will be attending primary school as well. Please make the count aware of this."

Serena recalled hearing this before and gave the prime minister a bit of a strange look. "Prince Wallace, yes. I don't know if it's good or bad luck that the two of them will be schoolmates."

Imperial Prince Wallace Noah Albareto was to attend primary school at the same time as House Banfield's young lord.

Chapter 1:
Fun, Fun Primary School

FINALLY, THE DAY of my admittance to primary school arrived. It was a comfortable spring day on the planet dedicated solely to hosting the school, but the entrance ceremony was more boring than I'd thought it would be. Plenty of children had gathered there from all over the Empire, everyone from princes to nobles in name only. There were so many that it hardly seemed this many could be considered society's elite. It was just the kind of scale you had to consider with a vast intergalactic empire.

I'd thought there would be a grand ceremony inside a building that could contain tens of thousands of students, but it turned out they were dividing the students by rank and holding several smaller ceremonies. In the end, the one I attended was rather plain.

The First Campus, where I'd been assigned, contained a collection of the best and brightest young nobles. Since only talented kids would be housed there, I guessed I had a pretty decent reputation. The large donation I'd made couldn't have hurt, either.

"Huh. Money talks."

"Liam, you'll be scolded if you're not quiet," Kurt Sera Exner warned me quietly. I was sure his father, Baron Exner, had paid a hefty sum as well.

I replied, "You're too serious, as usual."

Kurt and I had studied together under Viscount Razel, and being the same age, we were classmates once more. The Exners were still a young, upcoming villainous family, but I liked that they had the guts to suck their subjects dry. Though he was a rather serious type, Kurt aimed to become an evil lord like myself, so we were villainous buddies. He was a master swordsman of a major school called the Ahlen style, and he was good-looking and tall on top of that. In fact, he'd gotten even taller in the few years since I'd last seen him. He looked like a good-natured young noble, but I knew on the inside he was a pretty interesting and vile guy.

I glanced around and found us surrounded by just the sort of people I'd expect to see at a gathering of rich kids, all looking like they had authority and wealth to spare.

"Everybody here looks so self-important."

"That's obvious," Kurt said. "It's impressive just getting into the First Campus. Tons of kids wish they could, but don't have the standing and talent. Everyone here's probably really nervous."

Well, wasn't I just a villain for getting in with money alone then? Not that I cared about that. You can pretty much do anything if you have money.

I scanned the faces of my classmates and saw that Eila Sera Berman was one of them. Her brown hair was gathered in a ponytail. Eila had been born

to a family of villains, just like Kurt and me. Her father was Baron Berman, and she'd also trained with us under House Razel.
"She looks a lot more mature now."
"Yeah. Why don't you go give her a compliment? I bet it'd make her happy."
"You do it."
Eila was another friend of mine, one I'd kept in contact with over the last few years, and she did indeed look older in person than she had in video calls. It seemed girls grew up faster than boys in this world too.
While I enjoyed seeing a familiar face again, I couldn't help but notice another girl.
"Kurt, check her out. I've never seen blonde ringlets like that in real life!"
I nodded toward a girl with long blonde hair done up in big curls. Her hairstyle looked like it would be a pain to maintain, but it was proof of the time and money spent on it. Plenty of people here had hair that sparkled underneath the lights, but to me, this girl's hair shined like gold.
She stood tall, with a rather noble look to her. Well, obviously everyone here was a noble, so that wasn't wrong, but she seemed to embody it more than most. Her breasts were large for her age, while her waist was narrow. She had almond-shaped blue eyes, a small, round face, and juicy lips…and I thought I could sense her strong will from the expression on her face.
Due to my staring, Kurt probably assumed I was interested in her, so he told me what he knew.
"It's rare for you to be so starstruck, Liam. She's a duchess-to-be."
"Duchess-to-be?"
A duke or duchess was two ranks above a count, so I was a little irritated to find out she came from a higher-ranked family than me.
"She's famous. Her name is Rosetta Sereh Claudia. Her family is well known for being matrilineal."
There were way too many nobles in this world. In the Empire, dukes represented branches of the Imperial family, but there were a ton of them. It was impossible to remember them all, but even if you could, they might vanish at any time. New noble families were coming into existence at that very moment, while others faded away. However, I actually had heard that name before.
"Claudia, eh? I remember the name now."
"They pass the family headship on to women, and she's their only daughter right now."
"Their only daughter, huh? I see. So she'll be a duchess one day."
Having only one child was extremely dangerous, because if that child were to die, your whole line went with them. Of course, if the parents were still alive, they could try to have another kid, but it was still rather risky.
"She's probably the second-most important person here, then. The first would have to be that guy."

I looked from the blonde girl to a boy with long, straight blue hair. His appearance screamed “noble son,” and I knew he was Wallace—the 120th Imperial Prince.

This one’s got too many siblings. I mean, a hundred and twenty princes and princesses? How does anyone need that many potential heirs?!

I supposed I should consider myself lucky that I had gotten into this school in a world full of so many noble offspring with money and authority to spare. Right now, though, I just wished I could see Amagi. It was surprising just how quickly I ended up feeling homesick.

***

At the primary school's Second Campus, students received a different sort of special treatment. This campus was removed from the other school buildings and was practically isolated.

In the dorm near the Second Campus, a welcome party for new students was underway.

"Nice dancing there! Keep it up!"

"Booze! Bring…me…booze!"

"Gya ha ha!"

It would hardly appear to be a party held at a reputable school. Prostitutes had been called in to dance as entertainment, and the students were waited on by personal servants they'd brought with them from home. Fancy food and all sorts of alcohol covered the tables, and the new students ate and cavorted with upperclassmen.

In the center of them all stood the third-year student who ran things on the Second Campus. Derrick Sera Berkeley had brown hair, and his skin tone was unhealthy, but he possessed a lean, strong build thanks to his time spent in an education capsule. His uniform was decorated with gaudy adornments.

Derrick was making merry, practically pouring alcohol over himself. "Hey, new kids! Just do what I say and I'll help you make some really great memories here at school, okay?"

Like Liam, Derrick was already a reigning lord, being the baron of a small territory on the Empire's outskirts. In his position, he shouldn't have had much money, but his financial situation was quite favorable. After all, Derrick was a member of the Berkeley Family. Liam and he were both ruling nobles, but while Liam was known as the Pirate Hunter, Derrick was the leader of a family called the Pirate Nobles.

"You rule, Derrick!"

"I'll stick with you forever!"

"A toast to Derrick!"

Derrick drank in both his alcohol and the students' energetic cheers.

"It's a pity all the others can't come to the Second Campus and have to spend their time in school like good little boys and girls instead," he said, as if studying at a school was the most ridiculous concept he'd ever heard of.

The Second Campus was where students like Derrick, who had paid large donations for special treatment, were sent. If the school were to force them to take classes with other students, they would only cause trouble, so they

were sequestered here. This situation was one of the problems plaguing the Empire right now.
One of Derrick's lackeys came in to report to him. "Hey, Derrick, I just found out Liam starts school here this year."
"Huh? Who's that?"
The lackey was surprised that Derrick hadn't heard of him. "You don't know who I'm talking about?"
Annoyed by his lackey's impudent wording, Derrick swung the bottle he'd been drinking from and brought it down on the boy's head. The bottle shattered, alcohol and blood spraying onto the floor.
"Who the hell do you think you are? Will somebody beat the crap out of this kid? He's your next punching bag." Derrick directed his other lackeys to converge on the boy.
The now-targeted student clung to Derrick's legs, crying. "I-I'm sorry, Derrick! Please, forgive me!"
"Shut up!" Derrick kicked the boy and sat down on the couch, fuming. Some other boys dragged the student away, and the whole room grew quiet.
While the servants cleaned up the broken bottle and blood, a greatly irritated Derrick asked about Liam.
"Now that he spoiled my fun, somebody tell me who this Liam kid is."
"Y-yes, sir!" Voice trembling, the student who'd spoken up explained further. "Liam is Count Banfield. He's taken down several famous pirate gangs and goes by the nickname 'Pirate Hunter.'"
Derrick raised an eyebrow, a displeased look on his face. "Pirate Hunter? Guess that'd make him my enemy, wouldn't it?"
As the Berkeley Family were called Pirate Nobles, and Liam was making a name for himself as the Pirate Hunter, there was no way Derrick couldn't see him as his family's enemy.
"N-no way! He's no match for you, Derrick!" The other students tried to improve his mood.
The obvious flattery nevertheless did the trick, and Derrick lightened up.
"Right?" he laughed. "Probably just some country bumpkin noble getting too cocky. Oh hey, and something else occurs to me. The prince is starting school this year, too, isn't he?"
"Yes! His Highness Prince Wallace!"
Derrick smirked. It'll be fun to see him kneel before me.
Thinking something very disrespectful about the Imperial family, Derrick decided this year's batch of new students would be an entertaining group.

***

After the entrance ceremony, we headed to a classroom in the First Campus to get an overview of our new school.
At the podium stood our teacher, Mr. John—though from the stern look on his face, I thought a more fitting name would be Mr. Demon.

“As of today, I’ll be your homeroom teacher! The name’s John…but you’ll call me *Mr.* John!”
From that look on his face, Mr. Demon would be a more fitting name. He doesn’t seem like the type you’d want in charge of a class that’s supposed to get special treatment. While I was thinking this, he gave another student a sharp look.
“You, there!”
“Who, me?” A boy with blue hair—I saw it was Wallace—stood up gracefully. Now that I got a better look at him, I noticed his ears were pierced.
“What’s that you have on your ears?”
“Oh, these? I bought them in town before the entrance ceremony. They look good on me, don’t they?”
I guess he’s the type who wears his idiocy proudly. Serena, House Banfield’s head maid, had told me to be careful around Wallace, and now I saw why. Right off the bat, he came across as a problem child.
“Student Wallace, this is a place for nobles to learn the fundamentals of their roles. Do you really believe such accessories are necessary for that purpose?”
“Huh?”
It was clear Mr. John wouldn’t be making any exceptions to the rules, even for imperial princes, but I was curious about something. If he was going to scold a student for piercings, why ignore other students who appeared more deserving of scolding?
One such student, by the name of Tom, wore his hair in a towering tornado style that in my opinion should have been buzzed off on the spot. *I mean, are you serious about that goofy hair, Tom?* But Mr. John wasn’t paying him the slightest bit of attention.
Wait, does this have to do with money? Even my head maid had said that when you had a hundred and twenty royal offspring, princes weren’t all that valuable anymore. Wallace’s family must not have paid much for him to be here, with all those other siblings to be cared for.
“Student Wallace, one hundred push-ups.”
“W-wait a second… They’re just accessories! And I’m an imperial prince, you know!”
“I’m aware of that. Yes, you’re an imperial prince, and therefore should understand the conduct expected of members of the Imperial family. Now, you must do one hundred pushups!”
What is this, an army education? And Mr. John still hadn’t said anything about Tom’s hair. Tom’s family had to have paid a major sum to the school.
…I knew it. Money opens all doors.
“This isn’t right!” Wallace complained as he got down and began his pushups, but Mr. John remained cold.
“It is you who is in the wrong. What did you think primary school was going to be?” When Wallace finally finished, our homeroom teacher continued.

“Now, let’s move on. Firstly, there’s something I want you to understand. This is not your home. You will be living together in a dorm, and it will be your own responsibility to care for your needs.”
Everyone looked upset about that, but I had a different perspective. For instance, the laundry machines in this world were fully automated, far more advanced than those of my past life. Here, you put your clothes into one of these machines, and in a matter of minutes, they’d be cleaned, dried, and even ironed! It didn’t mean much to be told that you were responsible for your own needs in an environment like that.
“No one is going to be coddled here. What is expected of you is that you will become nobles who are worthy of bearing the future of the Empire on your shoulders.”
This wouldn’t be enough to turn us into admirable nobles. So this was all primary school would amount to.
“In today’s homeroom session, I’m going to lay out the basics of living here for the next six years. I will accept no disorderly conduct. You’d best understand that.”
Disorderly conduct? What are we, grade-schoolers? Well, seems like school isn’t going to be so easy for some of the people here.
“First of all—”
As I listened to the rest of Mr. John’s lecture, I found myself surprised for another reason…

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Wallace Noah Albareto was an Imperial prince, but only one of hundreds. Returning to the student dorms, Wallace collapsed onto his bed, exhausted from all the activities of his first day at school.
“Damn them all, making a fool of me…”
When there were so many Imperial princes and princesses, each individual one had no real clout on their own. Things would have been different if his mother were a noble of special distinction, or if he was in the single digits in line to the crown. Even if he were thirtieth in line to the throne, he might have had some power. But in reality, being well past that, even members of the Imperial family weren’t treated with much importance.
Wallace hardly felt like an Imperial prince at all. He’d only met his father, the Emperor, a few times in his life. He lived in the palace, sure, but just as one of hundreds of princes and princesses doing the same.
“P-primary school might be tougher than I thought it’d be. I dunno if I’m gonna make it…”
Wallace had received a decent amount of education before this, but primary school was indeed turning out to be more rigorous than he was expecting. He’d attracted the attention of his teacher, Mr. John, right on the first day, and not in a good way. He was scolded and made to do push-ups several times after more after that first instance.

“And we have to get up at six in the morning? That’s crazy…”
The students had to be at school by seven. Their schedules were packed, and by the time Wallace got back to the dorm every day he was exhausted. Martial arts training was especially intense. Wallace had previously trained in the Ahlen sword style, but this school’s regimented curriculum of basic martial arts was harsh for him.
“Am I going to be able to achieve my goal here?”
Wallace had a dream, and in order to achieve it…
“I can’t give up yet. I *will* pick up girls while I’m here!”
…first, he had to pick up girls.
It was no mere fancy for him. Wallace was seriously driven to pick up girls at primary school as it would be the best way to start achieving his real dream.

***

One day, after three months at primary school, I came to a realization while sitting in my dorm room, deep in thought.
Just what is this?
“It’s too easy here. I shouldn’t have wasted all that money on a big donation. Well, maybe that was necessary to keep Mr. John off my back…”
Mr. John was strict with everyone, but he’d never given me one of his stern warnings. Other than that, though, he treated me like any other student. Every morning after we woke, we did a little workout, and then it was on to our studies. After that came martial arts training, and after *that* we went home and slept. Some of the other students complained about our schedule, but I was a little concerned at how it wasn’t a challenge at all.
I mean, our classroom studies were mindless. Everything we “learned” in class I already knew, thanks to my time in an education capsule. The half-assed martial arts training was nothing more than a warm-up for my strengthened body either.
This was completely unexpected. I figured primary school would be a lot harder, but it reminded me of my earlier training at House Razel. It was so easy it was making me nervous.
“This can’t be right. Is it really okay? I didn’t think it’d be like this. How is this supposed to prepare a noble?”
Since I planned on becoming a fully-fledged evil lord, it was important for me to train my body. “Violence is pointless,” people liked to say, but that was a lie. Generally speaking, for the common person, one’s physical strength was meaningless in this world. However, I had learned in my previous life just how important strength could be. Bad guys committed violence, and good guys feared the bad guys. Violence was a type of power. Therefore, I’d been training for years in order to achieve that level of power, yet in this lax environment, my skills were sure to rust.

“No, this isn’t good. I mean, I thought after three months we’d be getting into the real thing, but this ‘training’ isn’t getting any more serious…”
At first, I thought we were just waiting for everyone to get acclimated to the routines here, but after three months, nothing had really changed. The routine was still barely more than a warm-up for me. I was starting to suspect that neither the physical training nor the course of studies would ever get any harder.
While I was fretting over this, I received a call from home. It was from Brian.
What, it’s not Amagi? I lay down in bed and took the call, to be greeted by a crying Brian.
“Master Liam, how many times did I ask you to contact us regularly?”
This guy is way too overprotective.
The primary school was well equipped, and if they acknowledged your need for it you could get a personal communication device installed in your dorm room. I had obtained one easily enough, thanks to my status as an actively ruling count. Thus, I could stay in contact with Brian at home.
“Don’t get so worked up just because I didn’t call for one day. What, is there some problem there?”
“No, everything’s fine. I was just so worried about you, Master Liam!”
Did Brian think so little of me that he was so concerned about me even at primary school?
“There’s no problem here either.”
“I’m so glad to hear it. Serena’s been worried about you too. How is your relationship with His Highness Prince Wallace?”
“Wallace? We get along fine.”
“What was that? Y-you get along?” This seemed to shock Brian for some reason.
“We’re not *close*. I say hi when I see him. That’s normal, isn’t it?”
“I’m relieved to hear it.”
Wallace’s background was apparently a bit problematic, so people tended to steer clear of him. His personality didn’t help things either, but I hadn’t had an issue with him.
“And… Master Liam?” Brian changed the subject.
“What?”
“Have you taken interest in any of your female classmates?”
“Female? Not really.”
“I-I see…” I could see Brian’s shoulders slump when he heard I hadn’t become interested in any of the girls in my class. Both Brian and Amagi never lost an opportunity to ask if any girls had caught my eye, since I didn’t have any ladies by my side yet.
But none had. Well, wait a second…
“I guess there’s been one.”
“Wh-who is it? Circumstances allowing, we can contact her family immediately!”

“Slow down! One just caught my eye is all.”
Rosetta. It was Rosetta, the duchess-to-be.

***

The next day, I approached the girl who was doing her best to be unapproachable.
Rosetta sat in the classroom, giving off an intimidating aura, as if she were purposely trying to keep the lowly masses from speaking to her. Her face was always dour in expression, and if you talked to her she would reply with obvious wariness.
We were presently on a break between classes, and those students who were close to each other were chatting amiably.
I ambled up to her and said, “Hey, Rosetta.”
“…Do you have some business with me?” She only gave me a brief glance out of the corner of her eye before returning her gaze to a holographic image projected in front of her. She was using even her short break time to study.
What, studying is more worthwhile to her than talking to me?
“I just wanted to chat with you. Have lunch with me.”
“I must respectfully decline.”
She shot me down in an instant. I winced, and some classmates who’d been watching us giggled. I gave them a glare and the group scattered.
“Come on, don’t be like that. Let’s be friends.”
As it was headed by a duchess, Rosetta’s family was higher ranked than mine. I didn’t know how much power they actually wielded, but there was nothing that could be done about the difference in our status. I gave it another modest try, but Rosetta shot me an uncomfortable look.
“I apologize, but I’m busy. I’d like to eat lunch alone.”
“I get it.”
Guess she doesn’t like me much. I thought of myself as a relatively well-known figure. A decent amount of people in my class talked about me, and the same went for the rest of the school. Apparently, upperclassmen sometimes sought me out to try to get a look at me. It was possible that Rosetta didn’t know who I was, but it was pretty unlikely. I wondered if maybe she didn’t like me because she knew me to be a villain.
Well, I guess I don’t have a chance with her.

***

I went on to the student cafeteria for lunch, without her.
By now the first-year students were getting used to primary school, and groups of friends chatted comfortably here and there in the cafeteria. I sat at a table with my evil lord buddies, Kurt and Eila.
“Brian won’t shut up about me keeping in touch with him.”

“That’s your butler at home, right? You can at least give him a quick call sometimes, can’t you?”
While Kurt gave me a serious answer, Eila responded while eating from a container of pudding. “It’s always annoying when they’re overprotective, isn’t it? I’m always getting scolded by my granny, so I get it.”
I agreed completely with Eila. “It must be hard for you too. I don’t even know what there is to talk about now, anyway. It’s not like anything ever happens here. Every day’s the same old stuff. The only thing interesting I’ve done lately is find a way to sneak out of the dorm.”
“You found a way to sneak out, Liam? Tell me about it later, okay?” Eila replied.
Typically, we weren’t allowed to leave the school except on days off, so if I wanted to have any fun outside of those days, I had to be able to sneak out of the dorm. It was no easy task, either, since the entire school was surrounded by high walls. Of course, I could have tried bribing the gate guard, but because I’d been so bored, I ended up finding a way to sneak out instead, just to have something to occupy myself with.
Kurt didn’t seem too happy about the way I was spending my free time. “I can’t tell if you’re a serious guy or not, Liam.”
“I probably don’t seem very serious to a serious guy like you. You’re *too* serious, though.”
“Y-you really think so?” Kurt seemed insecure about my little dig.
See? He’s so serious, he’s even worrying about being serious.
Eila smiled as she watched us, though I didn’t know what was so amusing about our conversation. She’d finished her pudding and had now propped her elbows on the table, resting her chin in her hands.
“What’s so funny?”
“Oh, I was just remembering when I’d watch you two during our training at House Razel. You guys are making me nostalgic.”
Back at House Razel, eh?
“Now that brings me back,” Kurt piped up. “Back then, Liam and I—”
“Yeah! You two really didn’t get along at first, but—”
I let the two of them reminisce and returned to my lunch. The cafeteria’s menu wasn’t popular with these noble students and their refined palates, but despite the food being specifically nutritionally balanced, I didn’t think it was bad. Eating luxurious meals every day could be too much. It seemed perfectly satisfying to me.
While I was eating, we heard a commotion from another table.
Eila stopped talking and looked in that direction, narrowing her eyes. “It’s Wallace again.”
She didn’t refer to him as “His Highness Prince Wallace” anymore, and instead used his name with open disgust. The same went for the rest of our classmates, for that matter.
I glanced over and saw Wallace was engaged in his usual activities.

“Want to eat together, little kittens?” He had forcibly claimed a seat at a table occupied by several girls by placing his lunch tray down on it. The girls were giving him strained looks.
Oblivious to their discomfort, he continued, “By the way, I don’t suppose any of your families are looking for a son-in-law of good lineage to take in? Or have a fortune grand enough to reward financial independence to a certain son-in-law?”
The girls averted their gazes awkwardly at his straightforward desire to be married into one of their families just so he could gain a role of importance there.
“I-I’m only a second daughter, so…”
“My brother is the heir of my family.”
“M-my parents plan to have a son.”
Hey, Number Three, doesn’t that just mean your family doesn’t have a male heir? “Planning” doesn’t mean it’ll happen!
Wallace accepted all their excuses, though. “I-I see. That’s too bad. Ah, sorry, girls, you’ll have to excuse me.”
Wallace leapt from his seat and began chatting up another girl he spotted nearby.
“You there! How would your family like a great son-in-law? I’m available right now!”
He hardly looked the part of a prince.
“It’s just wrong for that guy to be in line for the throne.”
Wallace’s embarrassing attempts at hitting on girls was shattering my image of an Imperial prince completely. He not only approached our classmates in the First Campus, but he indiscriminately went after any female upperclassmen he saw too. He even tried to pick up Eila as well, but when she told him her family wasn’t in the market for a son-in-law, he just said, “Oh,” and lost interest.
“He does this every day,” I said. “Doesn’t he get tired of it?”
“Well, Prince Wallace has his reasons,” Kurt said. The way he said it seemed like he understood, or maybe he just pitied the guy.
I couldn’t imagine what those reasons might be, but I was curious, so I asked, “Does he have some special circumstances or something?”
Kurt explained to me what happens to the unneeded princes and princesses.
“Apparently anyone past the hundredth in line for the throne isn’t treated very well. From the first to the thirtieth, they have some standing, but after that they might be considered even less important than nobles with no money.”
“Guess even Imperial princes can have it bad.”
“Those born to the royal family can’t give up their noble status, and if they can’t achieve anything as royalty, their only option for a respected position is to try and become a government official or a member of the military. Some of them make names for themselves in other fields, but Prince Wallace doesn’t seem like the type for anything like that.”

Many royals ventured into fields like art, but Wallace seemed set on becoming independent.
Eila's tone was cold when talking about the prince. "He wants to marry and take over another house, but it's clear from how he acts that he's completely unreliable."
What about the Empire?
I asked Kurt, "Can't the Empire just fund his independence?"
Since Kurt's family had made their own name for themselves, he didn't seem to know how to answer this, so Eila spoke up instead. "It's not that easy to become an independent noble. Without any supporters, there's nothing he can do on his own. Like Kurt says, he has too many siblings for his family to care to set him up like that."
Well, I now understood how tough it was to be an Imperial prince who had no chance of becoming heir, but the fact that Wallace chose to chase after girls as his path to independence made me laugh.
I watched Wallace hurry about, tray in hand, hitting on girls indiscriminately, but his efforts ended in failure every time. He even approached some girls two or three times, apparently having forgotten he'd already talked to them. He was getting sloppy and desperate.
As Wallace walked nearby us with shoulders drooping, I decided to call out to him and ask some questions. "Hey, Wallace, c'mere."
Kurt and Eila were both surprised when I called his name.
"Liam!"
"Don't get his attention, Liam!"
Wallace turned around when I called out to him and shook his head when he saw us. "What is it? I have no interest in men."
I frowned, and Kurt turned slightly pink. He also seemed irritated by Wallace's comment. For some reason, Eila was the angriest.
"What? Say that again!"
"Eep!" Wallace exclaimed at Eila's threatening tone, but he quickly cleared his throat and regained his composure.
"I think you should use more discretion in choosing who you associate with, Liam," Eila warned me. "I don't think Wallace is a good fit for you."
Isn't that a little harsh? But I was interested in this person, so I chose to talk to him anyway.
"Where's the harm, huh? He seems interesting. Wallace, don't worry, I'm not interested in your body, so come over here and sit down."
Wallace reluctantly approached our table. He appeared to be frightened by Eila, who was glaring at him like some sort of delinquent.
"Y-you're awfully rude, Liam. I thought you were a model student, but you're pretty vulgar, aren't you?"
Yeah, this guy's an idiot. I can't believe he thought I was a model student.
"It's better than being a pickup artist, isn't it?"
"Ugh!" Wallace knitted his brows at my suggestion that I was better than he was. Since he didn't refute my statement, though, he must have agreed with

me at least partly. “O-oh, shut up. I’ve set aside my shame so I can work for my future.”
“Shame, eh? I suspect you didn’t have much of that in the first place.”
He definitely seemed to enjoy chatting up girls too much for it to be the sacrifice of dignity he tried to make it out to be.
“Well, I’ve lived in the palace until now, and I barely had any opportunities to talk to girls,” Wallace explained. “The only women around were my mother’s attendants, my father’s women, and my sisters.”
“Huh? But you had your own female attendants, didn’t you?” Kurt asked, confused.
Wallace shook his head. “Not with a hundred and nineteen siblings. The servants work for our mothers, not us. And my mother would never let me lay a hand on them. Plus, I couldn’t trust any woman in the palace, attendant or not.”
Eila chuckled when she heard that. “It’s pretty impressive that you still became a womanizer after growing up in an environment like that.”
“Do you have something against me?”
“Yeah.”
Apparently, Wallace had some bad memories related to women, and I could understand. *Flesh-and-blood women really are a hassle. Amagi will always be number one for me.*
“Do you really want to be independent that badly, Wallace?” I asked him.
“Of course I do!” he barked. The noise attracted attention from all around us, but when people realized it was Wallace making a racket, they lost interest.
Just then, Rosetta passed by, giving off the same unapproachable air of a high-class lady as always. Wallace didn’t so much as turn to look at her.
“You’re not gonna chat up Rosetta?”
“That woman can’t provide for me,” he replied, as if it were completely obvious.
How does this guy say such embarrassing stuff with confidence?
He continued, “As I’ve told you, my goal is to become independent. I want to live on my own power.”
“Your own power?”
Apparently, Wallace desired to become someone who could support himself instead of being supported.
“I don’t care if I’m in the Imperial court or ruling my own territory as a lord… I just want to be able to stand on my own two feet. You might not know this, but when you’re an Imperial prince, you basically have no freedom.”
“I think you’re pretty far from standing on your own if you hope to rely on other people to gain your independence.” Kurt spoke honestly after hearing Wallace’s explanation.
“Urgh! I-I know that, but it’s the only way. If I entered the government or the military, I’d never really have any freedom, and I don’t want that.”

“I guess it is pretty hard for you, Your Highness.” Kurt said sympathetically.
“That’s right. Hey, so what do you say about becoming my patron?”
“I-I don’t know about that…”
“Why not?”
Kurt wasn’t soft-hearted enough to financially support an Imperial prince who couldn’t provide him with anything in return.
I really did think that Wallace was an interesting guy, though. It was fun watching him struggle to fulfill his ambitions. I took a liking to him.
“What about marrying into the family of a low-ranking official or a minor lord?” I asked, wondering if Wallace would consider a more realistic approach to independence.
Apparently, he’d considered that, but it didn’t work for him.
“I wouldn’t mind that, personally, but I *am* still an Imperial prince. The palace would never accept it. Imperial princes are only allowed to marry into houses ranked baron or above, or into those of court officials no lower than fifth-rank. To become a minor lord myself, I’d have to personally develop my own territory, and even if I could pull that off, it wouldn’t be acknowledged by the Imperial court.”
I had to respect the fact that this guy was doing what he could with severely limited options.
“I see. Then I’ll become your patron.”
Kurt and Eila both shot up from their seats at my declaration.
“You can’t do that, Liam!”
“No, Liam! There’s no benefit for you if you do that!”
Kurt tried to stop me, and Eila reminded me of just how pointless such a thing would be. But I ignored their protests, my mind already made up that I would look after Wallace.
“You’ll have the support of the house of Count Banfield. If you’re all right with being situated out in the boonies, I’ll grant you your independence.”
Wallace was dumbstruck for a moment, but he quickly stood up and straightened his posture and uniform.
“I entrust myself to your care!”
He bowed deeply before me.
This is hilarious.
“You can’t take this so lightly, Liam. It won’t be easy to sponsor Prince Wallace.” Kurt was still trying to dissuade me, but I didn’t intend to back down on something I’d already decided.
“There’s no advantage in supporting him. In fact, it’s pretty much all *dis*advantages! Come on, you can still take it back!” Eila chimed in and didn’t bother hiding the fact that she thought Wallace was completely worthless.
Wallace’s face was twitching. “Don’t you think you’ve been a little harsh this whole time, miss?”
I wasn’t truly sympathizing with Wallace or even impressed by his dreams. I just thought it was amusing to watch him struggle, so I wanted to keep him

around so I could see it. Plus, it couldn't hurt to make an Imperial prince my lackey. I was liking that idea more and more.
"I'm a count and the head of House Banfield, and so my words are law. Therefore, there's no problem here and I don't intend to take back what I've said."
"B-but…"
"Oh, you're so stubborn, Liam."
It seemed that Kurt and Eila simply couldn't understand my decision. Well, of course they couldn't. It was completely irreverent, setting it up so an Imperial prince would become my lackey.
"I'll keep my word," I assured Wallace, who was watching our exchange nervously. "I'll support your independence."
"Great, thank you! I don't care where I have to go, as long as I can stand on my own as the lord of my own territory. No matter how small my house is, I just want to live under my own power."
Not that that was easy.
"Just leave it to me. I'll have some decent land ready for you by the time our training is over."
Kurt held his forehead in his hand, exasperated. "Don't expect any help from me with this, Liam."
Eila had her head in *both* hands. "I can't believe this. Liam and Wallace… It's just terrible!"
The two of them were really worrying way too much. It would be no trouble for me to support a single Imperial prince.

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On the Imperial Home Planet, news of Wallace at primary school reached the prime minister as he toiled on his government work.
"Count Banfield has named himself Prince Wallace's guardian," one of his subordinates reported to him dryly.
"What?" The prime minister stopped in the middle of his work. At first, he wasn't sure he'd correctly heard what his underling had said.
"The count has declared himself Prince Wallace's patron. His Highness submitted the paperwork to make it official, effective immediately."
The prince had officially moved to abdicate from his royal status and his place in the line of succession. From now on, Liam would be responsible for supporting an independent Wallace. Liam wouldn't benefit in any way from becoming his patron, however; it would be almost impossible for Wallace to ever repay him in any significant way.
The prime minister simply replied, "It must just be a whim of the count."
"Well, at least one of the lesser princes has managed to become independent now."
"There shouldn't be any problem with it since it's Lord Liam, but I don't know why he'd bother helping the prince. Unless he's after…?"

The prime minister began to read into the situation. Despite Liam being called a child prodigy all of his life, the man began to vastly overestimate him.

The count's personal accomplishments aside, House Banfield has a rather stained reputation. Is this to demonstrate that they're contributing to the Empire?

Was that why Liam was supporting Wallace, who would do him no harm, but bring him no good either? If that were the case, then maybe there *was* some benefit to Liam, after all.

It will be hard to clear the Banfield name after two generations of sullying it, but with this move, Liam should gain back some of the trust of noble society.

If Wallace successfully became independent, then House Banfield's reputation would likely improve among the nobility. If that was Liam's aim, then it all made sense to the prime minister.

Chapter 2:
Duchess-to-Be

“FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, I am an Imperial prince no longer. I am simply Wallace!”
My new lackey had come to my room to loudly declare this to me for some reason. Kurt was visiting, too, so we three boys were stuffed together into one small room, just killing time.
“You sure are chipper,” I said to Wallace.
“Well, I managed to escape my position as an Imperial prince, thanks to you, Liam. I really can’t thank you enough.” He spoke as if the position of Imperial prince were anathema to him.
“You’d think it’d be more desirable to be an Imperial prince.”
Wallace gave me an exasperated look. “You still don’t get it, Liam. It’s extremely dangerous to be part of the line of succession. If you want to make it in that world,
you have to be prepared to fight your siblings tooth and nail in order to become emperor. I find the whole Imperial history of blood fighting against blood to be abhorrent.”
“I’ve heard all sorts of rumors,” Kurt said, and started talking about something that sounded like it was straight out of a tabloid. “They say when His Majesty ascended to the throne, he conveniently lost quite a few siblings at the same time. Maybe they’re just urban legends, but the rumors are pretty scary.”
Wallace lowered his voice, his face grave. “Don’t spread this around, but most of those rumors are true. All of my father’s rivals died before he took the throne. Another thing is that he even uses body doubles or holograms to attend most ceremonies.”
Kurt went pale when he heard this.
I heard similar stories in my past life too. It wasn’t all that uncommon of a thing for relatives to fight each other when there was a profit on the line. That was just how any world worked.
Wallace went on, looking relieved, “In any case, now I can safely drop out from that competition.”
I just sighed, unable to picture this carefree-looking boy seriously competing for the throne. “Well, your chances were pretty much nonexistent from the start, weren’t they? Could you really say you were even part of the race?”
“That’s not true. The situation in the palace is complex. It’s not just the royal offspring that factor in; you have to consider our mothers’ standings as well. If someone at the top of one faction makes a wrong move, before you know it the whole group can end up being executed together.”
“Seriously?”

“Seriously. The palace isn’t some fabulous paradise like commoners think it is. It’s a place of vicious competition between wives and wars between siblings, all of them with their sights set on the throne.”
So basically, you could be marked for death at any time without having done anything wrong yourself. It did indeed seem like the palace was a very dangerous place to live. *Royalty has it way harder than you’d expect.*
Wallace explained that there had been a period when this type of conflict was particularly heated.
“I hear things were especially bad two thousand years ago. The stories from back then are bad enough to freak *me* out, and the stuff that happened then left scars that persist to this day. So, you see? If *you’d* escaped from a life like that, you’d be happy too, wouldn’t you?”
I now better understood why Wallace looked positively elated to have been freed from all that.
“You’ve practically saved my life. Thank you, Liam.”
“Be grateful.”
“Of course!”
Well, I had heard some interesting things in our conversation, but there was something else I was curious about. “Wallace, why not try to ride on the coattails of one of your siblings who seems likely to succeed? That would seem as likely a path to independence as any.”
There already had to be some leading candidates for the next emperor. Having lived in the palace, I assumed Wallace would know who they were. Yet, as it turned out Wallace hadn’t considered attaching himself to one of his most promising siblings. In fact, he acted like that wasn’t even an option.
“There are many cases where the candidate everyone thought was most likely to take the throne ends up passing away under suspicious circumstances. And what do you think happens to the siblings who threw in with them?”
“They’re executed?”
“If you get a quick death, you’re lucky, but if a really petty person ends up emperor, then you’re in even worse trouble. Rosetta of House Claudia is a good example.”
I wasn’t expecting Wallace to mention Rosetta’s name. When I heard it, I pictured her looking at me coldly with hate in her eyes. She still hadn’t let down the wall between herself and those around her, remaining firmly aloof from the rest of the class.
“Rosetta?” I cocked my head. Kurt didn’t seem to know what Wallace meant by his remark either. We both looked at him curiously, so Wallace began to tell us the story.
“A long time ago, there was an Imperial prince who married into House Claudia…”
The tale he told us was of House Claudia’s fall, two thousand years ago.

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In a girls' bathroom in the First Campus, Rosetta regarded her reflection in the mirror and said to herself, "I am a daughter of the prestigious House Claudia. One day, I will be free of this torment."

House Claudia was a dukedom with some particular circumstances. The family had been headed by women for a long time, but it was a dukedom in name only, ruling over a small territory on the outskirts of the Empire. Normally, their humble domain would have classified them as minor lords, but the Empire was forcing them to maintain their status of a duke's house, as it had for nearly two-dozen centuries.

The reason for this was due to events that had occurred two thousand years in the past. At that time, the Empire had been going through a particularly nasty succession conflict. The crown prince, who should have ascended to the throne, passed away just before his succession. House Claudia had backed this crown prince and had taken in his brother from the same mother through marriage. When the new emperor was finally crowned, the new ruler was a prince who had been in competition with the deceased crown prince.

What followed was retribution from the Empire that targeted all those Imperial princes and princesses who had opposed the new emperor and the families that had supported them. Naturally, the former prince, now a duke of House Claudia, also received harsh punishment, and thus began the decline of the house as a whole. Their plentiful domain was seized, and instead, they were given a planet in ruin.

On their harsh new planet, survival itself was difficult, so they could hardly expect any tax revenue. From their meager income, they should have been demoted to minor lords, but the Empire forced them to maintain their title. They were left as humiliated dukes, setting an example of what would happen to anyone who defied the new ruling party. They were nobles, but at the same time they were outcasts. Though subjected to wretched mockery, those of House Claudia nevertheless persisted and held their heads high. All of the leaders of the family had been determined to escape their suffering one day, and that was true for Rosetta as well.

"I *will* change my family's fate."

***

The purpose of primary school was to provide sheltered noble children with at least the bare minimum of education, so they wouldn't shame their families. Those who showed promise, however, were sent to the First Campus to receive their education. Their routines were strict, but their placement was proof that the Empire recognized their abilities.

Rosetta was hopeful after being assigned to the First Campus, but reality was harsh.

I can’t keep up with our lessons.
She barely understood the curriculum. The material was too difficult, and the classes moved too quickly. She struggled because her family hadn’t had the means of providing her with a proper education beforehand. The other students in her class all had easy access to expensive education capsules, but she’d only been able to make use of a simple one for some basic learning. Compared to the rest of the students in her class, she was clearly falling behind.
Rosetta was doing her best to keep up, but it felt like there was an insurmountable wall before her, the presence of which only became more undeniable by the day. She dared not waste a moment of her time, so she used even her short break periods to study. Still, the gap between her and her classmates only seemed to widen.
I will not give up. I will persevere and escape this terrible cycle.
She was desperate to succeed, because she knew she and her family had no future if she didn’t.
I will get ahead.
While her classmates blithely attended their lessons, Rosetta alone was frantic. The stress didn’t ease even when she returned to the dorm that day. When she got back to her room, she was so exhausted that she just wanted to collapse on her bed and sleep. While her peers had plenty of time to grow accustomed to their new lives here, she alone was forcing herself to sit at her desk and study. Even if this effort didn’t help as much as she would like, she knew that without spending her time reviewing the material, her classmates would leave her even further behind.
“I will not give in. If I do, I’ll be forcing my own daughter to go through the same thing.”
The tears wouldn’t stop. Her consciousness soon grew hazy, and Rosetta collapsed against her desk in exhaustion.

***

Rosetta dreamed of a time long ago, when she was still a child. A messenger had come all the way from the Empire to invite her to a party. The young Rosetta was elated at the news, but her grandmother looked sad. Her mother embraced Rosetta and wept. At the time, Rosetta couldn’t understand why the two of them were so sorrowful.
“Grandmother, Mother, why are you crying?”
The two of them did their best to smile for the innocent child, but their tears still flowed.
“It’s nothing, Rosetta. You’re looking forward to the party, aren’t you? We’ll have to dress you up so you can attend.”
“Yes!”
Though her mother had little money to spare, she prepared a dress for Rosetta, and her grandmother styled Rosetta’s beautiful blonde hair.

Rosetta loved seeing her hair in thick curls, and felt like she'd become a princess.
"It looks great on you, Rosetta."
When her grandmother praised her hairstyle, Rosetta loved it all the more.
"Thank you, Grandmother!"
They had dressed Rosetta up as finely as they could, but it had all been in vain. When she arrived at the party on the Capital Planet, what awaited her were the jeers of *real* nobles. Even in her dreams she could recall those voices.
"My, what a tawdry dress."
"So that's the new clown of House Claudia. They're nobles in name only."
"I can't believe they'd show their faces on the Capital Planet. Aren't they embarrassed to even be alive?"
She'd been expecting to take part in a fun party, but when she arrived, she realized the reality of the situation: she had only been invited to be ridiculed. This was a form of entertainment that had been established by a long-dead emperor: a public event where those who he deemed had wronged him were made an example out of.
The whole reason for House Claudia's existence was to serve as an example to other noble houses—and this cruel reality had been thrust upon Rosetta when she was only a child.
Even after the emperor at the time had left the throne and passed away, the practice continued. It had gone on for so long now without anyone putting an end to it that it seemed it no longer *could* be stopped.
Some of the nobles at the gathering looked at Rosetta with pity, but none of them reached out to comfort her. If they had done so, they would have been going against the standing decree of the late emperor. However sympathetic they may have been, no noble wished to help House Claudia enough to do such a thing.
When Rosetta returned home after learning the hard truth, her mother welcomed her with a tight embrace.
"Remember the men there who pitied you. In the future, you will take the seed of one of them and have a child. That is how House Claudia has carried on until now."
The reason House Claudia was headed by women was because no one would be willing to marry into their family. The humiliated women had to make do with simply receiving the seed of men from noble houses.
"Rosetta, maintain your beauty as you grow up into a woman. If you do, men will take interest in you."
"Huh?"
"That is how House Claudia has continued its line all this time."
That day, for the first time Rosetta learned why she had never known her father, and why her house was trapped in their situation. The only reason women carried on the House Claudia line was because it was cheaper. If the head were a man, he would be able to have children as long as they had

some money and facilities to attract a wife from another house. The problem was that it cost money to invest in such facilities, and House Claudia did not have the means for such a thing. For a house with such little money, their only option was to pass their name down to their daughters the way they had been.
In the past, certain heads of the family had tried to put an end to their wretched situation, but there were people watching House Claudia. Two thousand years ago, that spiteful emperor had created an organization to keep watch over House Claudia. This malicious group was called the Observers, whose sole purpose was to ensure that House Claudia remained impoverished. Because of this organization, there was seemingly no way to bring an end to their suffering.
Rosetta felt the only way to escape this hell was for her to achieve success on her own.

***

When Rosetta opened her eyes, it was already morning.
“O-oh, no!”
Realizing it was already past time for breakfast, she flew up from her desk. Rosetta tidied her clothes and headed for the school building as quickly as she could, yet she still ended up being late for her first class. The young woman entered the classroom with tousled hair and her uniform disheveled. Her classmates laughed at the sight.
Mr. John shot her a look but didn’t scold her too harshly. “You’re late, Rosetta. Be seated.”
“Yes, sir. I’m terribly sorry.”
He was not being kind. He merely didn’t expect as much from her as he did the other students, so it wasn’t worth giving her too much attention. Normally, Mr. John would have given any late student an earful, but he didn’t go to the effort to do so for Rosetta.
Even here, I’m nothing more than a miserable example.
Her classmates’ eyes contained various emotions like scorn, pity, and interest—but all of them looked at her as if she were some kind of exotic specimen.
She could overhear some of the boys murmuring to each other.
“Late, huh? What is she, a delinquent? That’s quite a look she’s sporting today.”
“Yeah, she could stand to put more care in her appearance, don’t you think?”
“Uh, that’s not very convincing coming from *you*, Tom. Do something about that head of yours, seriously.”
As she headed for her seat, some of the girls pinched their noses. In her rush to get to class, she hadn’t had time to shower.
“What an awful smell.”

“It wrinkles my nose.”
“How crude can you be?”
Rosetta knew she had fallen behind everyone else in her class. She passed by the seat of the star student, Liam Banfield. As she passed by his desk, she ground her teeth.
Banfield…
For his part, Liam just stared forward at Mr. John, uninterested. Rosetta could only interpret this to mean she was so far beneath him as to not be worthy of notice. What else would she think? Liam’s political abilities had been praised ever since he was very young, and he held full mastery of his school of swordsmanship as well. He was even known by the nickname “Pirate Hunter Liam.” He was a child prodigy with social status and prestige to spare. He was different from her in every single way.
Liam was another student Mr. John never scolded, but unlike Rosetta’s situation, it was because there was nothing about him *to* scold. Liam had the best grades in the class and remarkable practical skills, but the area where he excelled the most was probably martial arts. Even up against Kurt, the second-most skilled martial artist in their class, he won every match.
The other students in their class never picked a fight with Liam because they knew they wouldn’t win. Even the troublemakers and upperclassmen never tried to start anything with him either. After all, Liam had personal and political power…completely unlike Rosetta.
Unlike her, he had everything. Rosetta couldn’t help but hate him.
I’m not worthy of your notice, I’m sure… You, who were born with everything. I detest you so much, I just can’t stand it.
She knew her resentment of him was unreasonable, but Rosetta’s envy of Liam was so strong that she couldn’t help but hate him.

***

In a dark alley on the Capital Planet lurked the Guide. As he watched vagrants rummage through garbage, he ground his teeth in frustration.
“Dammit… Why is this happening to me?”
Right now, the Guide was much the same as these specimens. Filthy and powerless, he wandered in search of sustenance. His bond to Liam had become so strong that he could only feed effectively on negative feelings that had to do with the boy. The Guide could survive only on whatever dregs of bad feeling that he could get his hands on.
Even now, though he was far away, Liam’s feelings of gratitude reached the Guide, choking him. He staggered along, holding his chest, collecting whatever negative emotions he could encounter, but his absorption of them was terribly inefficient. Under normal circumstances, he could get enough sustenance from a single person, but right now it would take about ten to keep him going.

As the Guide wandered miserably in search of negative emotions, dealing with the pain of Liam's gratitude, he expressed his grudge aloud.
"I'll kill you… I will kill you…"
The Guide swore revenge and was determined to sever his connection to Liam and be free from this suffering, but to achieve that, he had to slowly but surely collect whatever negative emotions he could, however inefficiently.
Suddenly, the vagrants he'd been eyeing started to fight each other.
"Hey, I found that food!"
"Shut up! This is what you get for drinking my booze before!"
When the Guide passed by the two men, however, their fierce expressions softened.
"S-sorry. I'm just so hungry. Do you mind if we split it?"
"Yeah, that's fine. I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have kept the booze all to myself."
With their negative emotions sucked away by the Guide, the two vagrants apologized and considerately divided their scavenged food between them.
The Guide was sickened by the sight. He hated to see them reconcile, but he didn't have the strength to spare to cause them to fight again.
Once again, he expressed his hatred for Liam, who had driven him into this dire situation.
"Just you wait, Liam. I will cast you down into the deepest pit of despair."

Chapter 3:
Mad Dog Marie

HALF A YEAR had passed since I'd come to primary school. Normally, by this time we'd be having a long break where I could return to my domain, but students weren't permitted to go home during their entire first three years. The reason for this was that there were students who threw a fit about not wanting to go back to school once they'd had a taste of the comforts of home again. *How stupid.*

Even if we couldn't return to our home worlds, we could at least leave the school property if we had permission. It was a ridiculously inconsistent policy. Students with more money than anything had luxury liners sent from home and instead spent their vacations aboard their ships.

I thought I might go stir-crazy in such a boring environment, but there was at least some fun to be had at school in the form of matches between mobile knights.

"Sounds like the sort of entertainment nobility would come up with. At least it's some kind of fun."

From the spectator seats in a sort of coliseum, I looked down at the arena floor, where giant holographic images of mobile knights fought against each other with weapons. It was a live stream of an exciting fight that was currently occurring elsewhere, and I found myself enjoying the show.

The mobile knights fought against each other with swords, piloted by students of the primary school. Once a year, a tournament was held for students in their third year and over to fight one-on-one in mobile knights and show off the results of their training. In participating, though, they had to understand that there was always a chance a match might result in a fatality. Some students perished through simple bad luck, while others just went too far. The incredibly stupid reason these tournaments were still held despite the risks was, as we were told, "so you students will grow into fine knights."

In the match I was watching, one side felt they were at too much of a disadvantage and threw in the towel, bringing the round to an end. The first-year students in the audience around me cheered at the spectacle, but the man sitting next to me was shrieking in despair.

"Oh, come on! You could do better than that!" Wallace, now my underling, held his head in his hands after losing a bet. "Nooo! I lost everything."

People gambled on the tournaments, and Wallace had just lost everything he had. *Yeah, this guy's an idiot.* I'd been giving him an allowance every month, which was expected since I was his patron, but something about it didn't sit right with me.

Eila, also seated nearby, glared at Wallace. "Do you have to make so much noise? Can't you go somewhere else?"

She was being rather aggressive, but Wallace just laughed it off. “Harsh as always. You don’t have feelings for me, do you? Is this that thing where you pick on the person you secretly like?”
He likely meant it as a joke, but a vein popped out in Eila’s forehead, and her face had taken on a fearsome expression. Were girls even supposed to be able to make that face? “*What? What* did you just say to me?”
Eila was normally a very cheerful, sweet girl, but for some reason, she acted like a completely different person around Wallace.
“Just joking,” Wallace apologized, frightened.
Kurt just sighed on the other side of him. “You just don’t learn, do you, Wallace? You really should catch on that Eila doesn’t appreciate your jokes. And by the way, it’s stupid to bet everything you have on a dark horse.”
“Well, isn’t it boring if you don’t take chances?” Wallace argued, ignoring that Kurt made a very fair point. “I mean, if I *had* won, I would have made a fortune. Today I was just unlucky.”
“Unlucky enough to lose everything.”
“Oh, shut it! Yes, I know, all my money’s gone… The next two weeks are going to be rough.”
My lackey was shooting me looks, but I just ignored him, because I wasn’t about to give him more allowance.
As the next match began, Kurt said to me, “A lot of the mobile knights participating are personal craft.”
“Yeah, but they’re just mass-produced units with superficial modifications. All these people care about is looks.”
Tournament participants had two choices: they could rent a training craft or use their personal machine. Most just used rentals, but those with money tended to bring their own mobile knights. Between rentals and personal units, the latter had the overwhelming advantage. Under those circumstances, one might wonder whether these fights were even fair.
Wallace was jealous of the rich students with their own craft. “Using a personal unit with superior specs to win is unfair. I’m an Imperial prince and even *I* don’t have one.”
Apparently, just because you were royalty didn’t mean that you got your own mobile knight.
“I’d want to fight with my own unit if I could, though,” I mused.
Wallace gave me a baffled look. “You have a personal craft, Liam?”
“I do.”
“Your machine’s called the Avid, isn’t it, Liam?” Eila piped up, rejoining our conversation. “It’s super strong!”
When the subject of the Avid came up, Kurt’s tone grew excited as well.
“It’s something to aspire to, having your own personal mobile knight. I’d love to have one someday, too. The Avid has a lot of modifications though, doesn’t it? Isn’t it hard to maintain?”
“Sure is. Oh, looks like the match is ending.”

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The tournament came to an end, its final victor being a baron from a remote domain called House Berkeley. Even though the child of a count had also participated, a baron of lesser rank had claimed victory. Did that mean actual skill was what counted in these matches? If that was the case, this was more appealing to me. It would feel good to beat down actual skilled opponents with the overwhelming might of my Avid.

Was this Berkeley person who won actually all that strong, though? From my point of view, he didn't seem all that formidable… Well, it was probably just the level the students here were at.

I decided to look into entering one of these tournaments. Back in my room, I got on my communicator and contacted Nias at the Seventh Weapons Factory.

Nias was an "intellectual beauty" type, with dark hair cut above her shoulders. When she heard my request, her eyes behind their glasses grew wide.

"Are you crazy, Lord Liam?"

"Of course not. You're doing maintenance on the Avid, aren't you?"

"Actually, maintenance is done, so it's in storage right now. The Avid can't be strengthened any more, though. Any further enhancements would ruin its balance. It would be easier to make a whole new craft from scratch."

"I don't care, just do it. I'll pay whatever it costs."

Every time we met, Nias pestered me to buy more battleships from her factory, but she balked at a simple request of mine. I just wanted her to fix the Avid's shortcomings and make it even stronger before I entered this tournament.

Before I came to this school, the Avid hadn't been functioning well. I'd asked the Seventh Weapons Factory to correct these issues, but the response of Nias and the other engineers there had been, "The machine can't keep up with the pilot's skills." Didn't that just mean that it was time to make the craft stronger again?

"It's not a matter of money. No matter how much you pay, it simply can't be improved any further. Well, maybe it could be enhanced by using a whole heap of rare metals, but…"

I hadn't been expecting that. "Rare metals? Do you mean orichalcum?"

Orichalcum was a staple of many fantasy worlds, and it existed in this one too. It was an incredibly strong metal, so rare that it was extremely expensive and hard to get ahold of. However, it wasn't something that you could just buy if you had enough money—sometimes you couldn't get any no matter how deep your pockets were. Apparently, Nias needed several different types of metals as rare as that.

"Orichalcum, adamantite, mithril… We'd need those, and more. We'd need more experienced engineers too. And then they'd all be tied up with this

project for quite a while, so everything would probably cost more than a basic fleet of ships."
It took a vast amount of money to process such rare metals into a usable state, too. As Nias pointed out, it'd be more reasonable to have a whole new fleet of ships constructed than spending the funds, resources, and personnel on something like that. From a budgetary perspective, what I wanted to do was absolutely foolish. Nevertheless, I wanted something cool over being practical.
"I see. So you can improve the Avid if you use rare metals, then."
"Well, sure, but I think they'd be hard to obtain even for you, Lord Liam. I'd suggest giving up on modifying the Avid and just having a whole new craft constructed."
Throw away the Avid and construct a new machine? There was no way I'd do that!
"No, I like the Avid. These new craft aren't my style."
What I was asking, in terms from my old life, was basically something as impossible as taking a classic car and giving it the specs of a modern, computerized model. "Give me a navigation system, convert it to electric power, and add all these other functions too!" Nias, in turn, was asking why bother starting from a classic car in the first place? She wanted me to get a new model, but this was a question of personal taste. I had no intention of compromising.
Nias gave in to my persistence. "All right, I'll draw up a list of what I'll need, so you can contact me when you've got the required materials and funds. We'll really need a test pilot to get this done too."
"Test pilot?"
"Yes. You'll need to give us a pilot with skills as good as yours—no, just one skilled enough to operate the Avid would do. If you can do all that, we'll accept your request to strengthen the Avid."
Even though she said all this, her tone suggested what she was really thinking was, "I'm sure you won't be able to do all this, so please just give in and buy a new model."
You know, I always thought Nias was a bit of an idiot, but has she even forgotten that I'm a count? If it were someone else, I'd have her punished for her insolence! Well, fine, if you're going to be that way, then I'm going to do it! If that's the attitude you want to take, then I'll show you how serious I am.
"You won't go back on your word, right, Nias?"
"Of course I won't. If you can get all this stuff together, then please contact me. Though, I wouldn't mind if you just give up and buy a new model, or maybe some ships—"
I cut the call in the middle of her babbling, and opened a new call to contact home.
Amagi came to the monitor. I was relieved to see she appeared untroubled.
"Have you been well, Amagi?"

“You asked me the same thing yesterday, Master. Is there something you need?”
Talking to Amagi almost let me forget how much Nias had annoyed me.
“I’m sending you a list of things I want you to get for me. We’ve got rare metals created by the you-know-what in storage, right? Send ’em to the Seventh Weapons Factory, as quickly as possible.”
Amagi confirmed receipt of the list. She remained as expressionless as always, but even she looked a little surprised at its contents. The vibe I got from her definitely said, “Are you seriously asking this?”
“Are you sure about this?”
“Of course. It’s all for the Avid. We’ll spare no expense.”
“Is this not an unusual amount of materials just for modifying one mobile knight?”
“It’s a challenge from Nias. She thinks I won’t be able to get it all together. So I’m going to do just that. I want to see what kind of face she’ll make when I do.”
“Very well.”
“And send *her* as my test pilot.”
Just emphasizing “her” was enough for Amagi to understand who I was referring to. This was what it meant to have a valuable assistant who got me.
“You wish Marie Sera Marian to be the Avid’s test pilot?”
“Yep. Let’s put her right to work.”
My choice was Marie Sera Marian—a female knight who had joined my house when I saved her from her petrified state.

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Several months later, Nias trembled in fear before the sight of a mountain of rare metals that had been delivered to the Seventh Weapons Factory—the very materials she herself had requested.
“You actually went ahead and sent me all this stuff? I mean, where did you even get it?!?!”
Standing in front of the pile of rare metals sent by House Banfield was a female knight with long, straight, lilac-colored hair that fluttered behind her. She wore an outfit with pants that looked easy to move in, despite being embellished with metal arm and leg guards. She had clear, pale skin with purple eyes, a sharp gaze, and vibrant purple lipstick to match. She was slender, and her tall height made her appear even thinner. In holsters on her hips were a pair of pistol-like weapons.
Liam’s new knight candidate, Marie Sera Marian, greeted Nias with a serene, refined tone. “Marie Marian, reporting for duty as the test pilot of the Avid. I look forward to working with you, Engineering Captain.”
The documents Nias had just received with the arrival of this woman showed a middle name for her, but since Marie wasn’t yet fully qualified as

a knight of the Empire, she had given only her first and last names when introducing herself.
“Huh? Err, I…” Nias did her best to process the situation, Marie put a hand to her slightly reddened cheek and gave her an almost entranced look.
“This is a direct order from Lord Liam himself. I will do anything I can to see his project succeed, so I hope you’ll help me achieve that.”
The dashing, tall woman was making a face almost like a maiden in love.
Seriously, though… Just who is she?
Nias had been to Liam’s mansion many times in the past, but she’d never heard of this knight named Marie. She had to be skilled if Liam had sent her personally, but if that were the case, then Nias felt like should have already known about her.
One of Nias’s staff members stared at Marie thoughtfully. The aged, skilled engineer looked as though he was remembering something. “Marie? Marie Marian? Seems like I’ve heard that name somewhere before…” He thought about it for a while, but in the end, he just couldn’t remember where he knew the name from.
Nias shot Marie a suspicious look. The woman seemed too thin and pretty to be a knight. “Err, can you really pilot an older craft without any of the modern assist functions? There are hardly any people who can do that nowadays, you know?”
Can this woman really pilot the Avid?
Marie smiled, oblivious to Nias’s concerns. “Back in my day, you weren’t considered a real knight if you used assist functions. I understand that Lord Liam’s Avid is a difficult craft, but I assure you there won’t be any problems. I’m eager to see what sort of fight it will put up.” Her cheeks were flushed and she fidgeted with excitement. “Lord Liam has left his personal craft in my hands! Nothing could make me happier!”
Huh? What’s with this lady? Nias’s first impression of Marie was that she was just a suspicious weirdo who sounded like a noblewoman for whatever reason.

Still, in front of the documents before her, Nias felt her spirit as a skilled engineer flare up inside her. I'll never get another opportunity to go all out with so many precious metals again. I should do everything I've always wanted to with this machine. I bet I can learn a lot from it!
Nias started drooling at the thought of the experiments she could run, and testing things she'd never had an opportunity to try before. She wiped her mouth clean and decided to get started right away on the Avid's modifications.
"Well, let's get started, then."
True as ever to her own desires, Nias got started right away on the Avid's enhancements.

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Marie, the Avid's new test pilot, thought back to the events of that day when their nightmare began.
We were all thrown into hell that day.
She could still remember the face of the man who became emperor on that day two thousand years ago. The man had waged a fierce battle of succession with his siblings and had come out on top of it—and when he won, he began to purge not only his opponents, but anyone who so much as supported one of them. He probably either became paranoid and wanted to prevent possible attempts at revenge, or just wanted to eliminate anyone who knew the truth about how he had removed the competition. At this point, Marie didn't care which it was, but there was one thing she knew for certain.
I will never forgive that rotten bastard for petrifying us and jailing our consciousness in those stone bodies for two thousand years. And I will never bend a knee to any royal who inherited that man's blood.
Marie didn't take sides in the succession conflict at the time. She instead was a renowned knight, and one of three especially formidable warriors who had contributed much to the Empire. Due to her skill and popularity, she'd had dealings with various members of the royal family, but they were more like mere acquaintances to her. Marie's true loyalty was to the Empire itself. Marie had intended to devote her services as a knight to whoever ultimately became the emperor.
Marie had a close friend at the time, a noble girl who was a bit of a tomboy. It was this friend who got caught up in the succession conflict.
I begged for her to be spared. I threw myself into my work and did everything he asked of me, followed every order to produce whatever results he desired. And yet, he still…
Even now, her blood boiled when she recalled it. Caught up in the awful conflict, her friend's family fell from grace. Marie couldn't just stand back and watch that happen, so she had done whatever she could to come to her friend's aid. The Empire had demanded military achievements, and Marie

had provided them, piling up victories in battle for the Empire's sake, always hoping that in return her friend's family would be shown mercy. But all that waited at the end, however, was betrayal.

When Marie returned from her final victory, the emperor had her arrested and made use of an insidious process to turn her and her subordinates to stone, along with others who had only loyally served him. As an additional cruel touch, he had seen to it that they remained conscious as they lived out the next two thousand years as stone statues. These victims were made into a display piece, as a warning to anyone who might oppose the emperor, but after a while people stopped even coming to look at them, and finally more than a thousand years had passed without a single soul stumbling upon them. At least, not until Liam appeared.

I remember how he looked even now.

Liam had seen to it that elixirs were used to deliver them from their living prison. She remembered that as he had looked down at all of them, her hands reached out to him, tears spilling from her eyes. Illuminated by the lights above, Liam shone with a divine splendor.

Who could have predicted that I would cross two millennia to end up serving Lord Liam? Life truly is miraculous. However...

Marie's sole regret was that she had been unable to end her old friend's torment.

***

On the Capital Planet, Tia was hard at work serving as a government official as part of her path to becoming a knight of the Empire. As Liam's foremost knight candidate, Tia was currently working for the prime minister. She was receiving special treatment, but that was largely because of her personal abilities. Her superior skills had caught the eye of the prime minister, so she had earned the enviable position honestly. It was clear to anyone that she was on the fast track to success, and she was in a position to be envied.

At the moment, Tia was in a reference room, perusing information on Marie Sera Marian. The data was top secret, and she obtained it using dubious methods.

"Marie Sera Marian. An Imperial knight from two thousand years ago…"

Most records of Marie had suspiciously been erased, but there was some mention of her in old documents. Marie had been a leading knight of the Empire, but she ended up being imprisoned in a petrified state by the vindictive emperor of that time.

The ancient records made mention of a nickname Marie had been given as a result of her ferociousness in battle… A nickname that hardly matched her appearance: Mad Dog.

Even the little scraps of data Tia had uncovered made it clear that Marie had been part of a trio of talented, even legendary knights. Tia furrowed her brow and realized that she was feeling…jealous.

“That relic is going to be so full of herself, being entrusted with Lord Liam’s personal craft. How incorrigible. ‘Mad Dog’ Marie, huh? She’s just a mutt!”
True, she was a skilled knight, and Liam had acknowledged her abilities as well. The first task he gave her was to serve as the test pilot for the Avid’s modifications. That he would recognize and entrust this newcomer with such an important job was unbearable to Tia.
“You have not earned the right to serve Lord Liam!”
The more she fumed, the more Tia saw Marie not as a colleague, but an enemy. She had an inkling that Marie felt just as threatened by her as well. They had both been recognized for their superb abilities and were therefore rivals vying for the position of Liam’s head knight. Rather, it would be fine if that was all, but they considered each other more as enemies to be eliminated.
“I’ll make her understand who is more deserving of being Lord Liam’s head knight.”
Tia closed the files on Marie.

***

Back at school, Rosetta was overwhelmed with feelings of hopelessness. It was now a year into the school’s curriculum and her grades were still dreadful. Her end-of-the-year ranking was pretty close to the bottom for her overall year. But of course, compared to the rest of the students in the First Campus, Rosetta was dead last.
“I worked so hard. What else can I possibly do?”
She had studied to the point of forgoing sleep, but she could never catch up to her classmates. No matter how many times she checked the grade rankings on her tablet, she never showed meaningful progress.
As she stumbled through the halls with despair plain on her face, some students who weren’t from the First Campus came walking toward her. In the center of the five-person group was Baron Derrick Sera Berkeley, a third-year student. Rosetta had heard only bad rumors about him, so she wanted to steer clear. She turned her face away and tried to pass by the group quickly, but Derrick lunged forward and grabbed her arm before she could.
“Oh? Where do you think you’re going, beggar?”
Rosetta tried to shake off his grip, but he was too strong; she was stuck. Every day, Rosetta diligently trained to improve herself, but Derrick, who likely went to no such efforts, had been strengthened by education capsules enough times that he was far stronger than her.
This was the reality of their world: effort was meaningless in the face of wealth.
“L-let go of me!” Rosetta resisted, and Derrick took a mean-spirited pleasure in her struggles.
“Oh, don’t be so cold, Rosetta—the destitute duchess-to-be.”

Derrick's guffawing hangers-on reminded Rosetta of the nobles who had mocked her at the party she'd attended as a child. She wanted to curl into a ball at the memory.
Derrick ran his eyes over her appraisingly. "Pretty enticing physique you've got there, for someone of your limited means. It makes sense for a family that sells their bodies to excel in that area though, doesn't it?"
Derrick shoved her and she went flying, her tablet falling from her grip. It hit the floor and its screen activated, displaying the grade information she'd just been looking at. Derrick picked up the device, and when he and his buddies studied the information on the screen, they burst out laughing, holding their stomachs.
"D-don't look at that!"
Rosetta tried to retrieve her tablet, stretching her arms for it, but the much-taller Derrick lifted it out of her reach.
"These grades are a little *too* low, don't you think? You're a complete failure of a noble. You're even worse than a commoner, aren't you?"
When Rosetta's body thumped against Derrick's as she grabbed for her tablet, he smirked and grabbed her by the arm..
"Aah! L-let go of me!"
"Aw, c'mere."
This time, however, Derrick pulled her toward an unused classroom. He threw her into the room, and then he and his lackeys surrounded her.
"Your family gets its genes from talented nobles, doesn't it, Rosetta? Here, I'll give you some of mine right now." Derrick unbuckled his belt and looked down at Rosetta with lust in his eyes.
Rosetta broke out in a cold sweat. "Wh-what are you saying?"
At first, she thought he was only toying with her, but then she realized he was all too serious.
"You should be thanking me—you get to pass on the superior genes of House Berkeley. But don't be so brazen as to call *yourselves* House Berkeley, though. We'll never acknowledge your kid, got it?"
Rosetta wanted to scramble to her feet and flee from the slowly advancing Derrick, but his hangers-on had her surrounded and there was nowhere for her to run. She was angry at herself for being too powerless to resist. *Why do I have to be so weak?*
"Heh heh, don't mind if I help myself to a little future duchess." Derrick reached out and easily held Rosetta down, despite her attempts to resist.
"S-stop! Someone, help me!"
Through the classroom's open door, she could see students and teachers passing by in the hallway, but all of them pretended not to notice her plight. Why didn't they try to stop Derrick? He was just a mere baron. The truth was, no one dared earn the ire of the family known as the Pirate Nobles, lest an ugly situation break out in the Empire. They were too afraid to upset them, so no one would go up against him just to save the lowly Rosetta.

Why is this happening to me? Why? Is it my fault? Is it House Claudia's? Why are we still atoning for a sin committed two thousand years ago?
Derrick covered her mouth so she couldn't scream, and Rosetta cursed her own helplessness.
Just then, one of Derrick's goons went flying.
"Huh?"
For a moment, Derrick and his lackeys were dumbfounded, but then they turned their heads toward the classroom door. Standing in the doorway were Kurt and Wallace, with Liam ahead of them.
"Well, I thought I'd see what all the commotion was about. Who the hell are you guys? Haven't seen you before."
As Liam gave Derrick's group a puzzled look, Wallace seemed to catch on to the situation and all the blood drained from his face. "Liam, that's Baron Berkeley! Derrick Berkeley, a third-year!"
Kurt apparently didn't realize the implications. He must not have been familiar with House Berkeley. He said, "You're the one who won the tournament. Aren't you a student from the Second Campus? What are you doing here?"
Liam also seemed to not know anything about Derrick. He looked at the upperclassman haughtily. "What'd you come here for? Whatever. You're an eyesore, so get going. I'm in a bad mood right now."
This was clearly a disrespectful way to talk to an upperclassman, but the thing that set Derrick off was hearing the name "Liam."
"So you're Liam, eh? Well, I'm Baron Berkeley, and if you think you can get away with talking to me like tha—aah!" Before he could finish, Derrick flew across the room.
Liam had closed the distance between them in a split second and smashed his fist into Derrick, but it had happened so fast that it took Rosetta a few seconds to process it.
Liam was enraged. "If you think you can get away with talking to *me* like that, think again! I'm a count! Show me some damn respect, Baron!"
He walked up to Derrick where he lay on the floor and kicked him. Derrick's lackeys were stunned momentarily, but they snapped themselves out of it and leapt at Liam.
One of them growled, "Who do you think you are, you country bumpkin? Banfield, you're done f—"
This time, Liam sent the lackey flying with his fist. "You'll address me by my proper title! You're just some baron's goon! Know your place!"
Liam singlehandedly bested Derrick and the other students from the Second Campus. Kurt and Wallace frantically tried to stop him, but they were no match for their wrathful friend.
Kurt cried, "Liam, violence isn't the answer!"
Wallace shouted, "Aaah! Liam, if you're going to fight, pick your opponents better!"

Derrick's goons lifted him from the floor and bolted into the hall, but Liam couldn't pursue them with his two friends clinging to him. "Lemme go, you two! Derrick, you bastard! I'll remember your face! You just wait!"
Rosetta was rooted to the floor in shock. All she could do was rearrange her disheveled uniform and stare at the scene before her.
Liam looked unsatisfied, but he'd calmed down enough to notice Rosetta, at least. He reached a hand out to her. "You okay?"
Rosetta just slapped his hand away with a dry crack. The sound echoed through the room for a moment, and for a moment, Liam didn't realize what had happened.
When he understood, he frowned. "What was that for?"
Rosetta returned Liam's glare, tears in her eyes. "Don't touch me. My family may have fallen low, but I am still a future duchess. I owe no thanks to the likes of you!"
Normally, Rosetta likely would have thanked him, but she had reached such a defeated state in her life that all she felt for her savior was frustration. This, coupled with the fact that it was Liam who had saved her, the object of her resentment, made the young woman unable to say more.
Shakily, she stood up and left the classroom to flee, but she still felt a twinge of self-disgust. *Why am I such a fool? I can't even thank him!*
She hated herself for being so powerless. She hated everyone around her for looking down on her and not coming to her aid. And then there was Liam, who did whatever he wanted with his personal power and the power of his status, and who dazzled her so much that her envy was a form of hatred. Beneath the hatred, she was grateful he had been kind to her, but it was a humiliation on top of her humiliation to receive his charity.
I wanted to be like that. I wanted to be like Liam.
Rosetta felt like she was reaching her mental and physical limit as time passed at this school.

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While I watched Rosetta run off, I thought to myself, *Oh, she's good. She's great!*
I was a count, but she was going to be a duchess, so she deemed herself too superior to owe me any gratitude. She hadn't said as much in words, but her attitude couldn't have made it any clearer.
"Liam, do you understand who that was?" Wallace asked me, his eyes flicking about nervously.
I grinned at him, sensing his uneasiness. "Of course I do, and I've taken a liking to her."
Kurt gave me an exasperated look. "Your bad habit is rearing its ugly head again, Liam."
This piqued Wallace's curiosity. "Bad habit? Hey, is Liam a problem child or something? Well, is he?"

Kurt just gave him a vague answer. “He’s not a problem child… He just has some issues.”
“Aww, tell me what you mean!”
Kurt knew me well from all our time training together, but he apparently didn’t feel like explaining things to Wallace. After all, Wallace was an idiot, though he was fundamentally a good guy—not a villain like me and Kurt. Still, I guess I needed to make sure Kurt didn’t spill too much. “Don’t say that. A person has to have their hobbies and all. You wouldn’t get in my way, would you?”
“Would there be any point?”
“See, you get it. Just sit back and watch.”
I wanted Rosetta to submit to me entirely. Her only emotional support was her family back home. How entertaining would it be to see that haughty noble lady obey my every command? I was attracted to the docile, obedient types, but sometimes I really wanted to see a woman who made it obvious how little she cared for what I thought.
I recalled something an old coworker, Nitta, once mentioned to me in my previous life. He described a strong-willed woman in a period drama who chose death over submitting to a villain. This situation wasn’t exactly like that, though, and he’d also discussed other dramas he’d seen in which evil men finally succeeded in making iron-willed women submit to them.
I felt like I was being the ultimate evil lord in this moment. I found great satisfaction in the fact that ultimately, my subordinates would always go along with whatever I wanted…especially my devoted knights-in-training, Tia and Marie. And I did like that about them, but people are greedy creatures. Every so often, I’d like to make a defiant person submit to me as well.
The blood of an evil lord was stirring in my veins. Kurt might be somewhat critical of me, suggesting it was a bad habit of mine to become obsessed with a controversial challenge, but I wouldn’t let him get in the way of my fun.
Rosetta… You’ll curse your misfortune for being chosen by me. I’m going to trample over all that you are!

***

Liam headed off to his room in the student dorms. Kurt watched him leave, then sighed now that he was alone with Wallace. Still, he seemed to look a little happy for some reason.
“Geez, Liam never changes.”
Unlike Kurt, however, Wallace had grown quite nervous. “Is Liam really gonna be okay? I don’t want my patron to up and disappear on me. I mean, he’s up against the Berkeley Family now.”
“‘Family’? He’s just a baron, right?”

Wallace was shocked to learn that Kurt was so uninformed about the Berkeley Family. “Y-you don’t know about them? They’re called the Pirate Nobles; they’re a pretty dangerous bunch. In numbers alone, they’re probably bigger than a duke’s family.”

House Berkeley ruled their domain in an unconventional manner for an Imperial noble house. They were essentially a wide collection of related barons; hence their “family” moniker. Once a child came of age, they were made a baron, given a slice of the domain’s territory, and were forced to become independent. However, Derrick’s father, a baron himself, was the one who actually oversaw the entire conglomeration of territories—the big boss of the family.

They maintained their peerage at a low level to limit their obligations to the Empire. They valued financial gains over advancement in noble society. This made them a bit of an odd group.

On top of that, the means by which they earned their profits was most unbecoming for their noble status: piracy. Normally, a criminal family like House Berkeley would have been eliminated, but their contributions to the Empire were not trivial. They specialized in supplying the Empire with hard-to-obtain elixirs year after year, which made it difficult for the Empire to cut ties with them.

Hearing all this from Wallace, Kurt finally understood his new friend’s nervousness. “Pirates… Now I get it. That makes sense.”

“If you get on their bad side, they won’t show you any mercy. Liam should formally apologize right away.”

Kurt shook his head at Wallace, knowing Liam would never do such a thing. “That’s not happening. It’s Liam who shows no mercy to pirates, after all.”

“But this is different—they’re nobles! They may be engaged in piracy, but they’re still nobles, and powerful ones!”

“As long as they’re committing piracy, they’re nothing but bandits to Liam. He’s already wiped out the fleet of one noble who was involved in piracy.”

Wallace gaped in surprise. “He’d go that far? B-but this is House Berkeley we’re talking about. Liam can’t beat them! They’ve got real pirates working under them, too! They’re practically the big boss of all the pirates operating in the Empire!”

Even if his friend heard all this, Kurt knew none of it would alter Liam’s view. “I’m even more sure he won’t apologize, then. Liam would never tolerate piracy of any kind. In fact, I strongly suspect he’ll try to take them down instead.”

Wallace dropped to his knees on the spot and slammed his fist against the floor. “There goes my independence! It’s all over!”

Anticipating House Berkeley’s retribution, Wallace could only tremble in fear.

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In the student dorms of the Second Campus, the recovering Derrick looked rather pitiful with several bandages adorning his face.
“I’ll kill that Liam guy.”
Angry at Liam for the beating he’d received, he immediately decided to kill the boy. No one around him objected to that decision in the slightest. In fact, Derrick had decided that killing him wouldn’t be enough.
“I’ll destroy his domain. I’ll take everything from him, and then slowly torture him to death.”
If the Guide had heard this, he no doubt would have been dancing with joy. Unfortunately, the Guide was nowhere near.
“Did you get any information on him?” he asked one of his lackeys.
“Y-yes! Umm, this is what we have right now.”
Hastily gathered information on House Banfield was projected into the air from the underling’s tablet. It indicated that House Banfield’s home base was protected by a considerable amount of firepower. From this, Derrick understood that taking them down wouldn’t be a simple feat.
“I see they own a reclaimed planet.” The planet currently under development in Liam’s territory caught Derrick’s eye.
His man reported, “That world is only protected by a defensive force of about a thousand ships.”
Derrick’s battered face broke into a smile, revealing that he’d lost his front teeth. “Contact home and have a fleet prepared from my domain. Gather up some pirates for me as well. And we’re gonna use *that*, too. We’ll send all of it to his home base and wring everything out of that plentiful domain of his and plunge it into ruin.”
Derrick was basically a noble in name only, but he had his own small domain and a fighting force to go with it. There was a limit to his own firepower, but he could bolster that force with the families of his hangers-on and pirates and ultimately scrounge up a force of ten thousand.
“So you think yourself a ‘pirate hunter’? I’ll show you the real terror of pirates. You’ll regret making me angry, Count Banfield.”
Derrick’s villainous sights were set on House Banfield’s domain.

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At the command center for the defensive force that protected House Banfield’s pioneer planet, quite a commotion had arisen.
“Commander! A fleet of six thousand ships is headed our way!”
“Six thousand?” The commander in charge of the defensive force was shocked at the sight displayed on the control room’s enormous main screen. The fleet appeared to be a mix of pirate ships and the personal forces of various nobles.
The entire base had been thrown into disarray and confusion. In response to the impending attack, communications operators frantically relayed orders.
“Is it really six thousand?” the commander asked his subordinate.

“Y-yes, sir. There’s no mistake.”
The restored planet’s defensive forces had been augmented, but they still numbered only one thousand ships. They could probably scrape up more from the surrounding area, but they wouldn’t even be able to muster a full two thousand, and doubtfully in time to meet the attack. They were greatly outnumbered, but so far, the commander felt confusion rather than hopelessness. He simply couldn’t understand how or why this situation had developed.
“Where are these idiots even from? They must be pirates from some far-off territory if they’re here to pick a fight with House Banfield. Figure out who they are.”
His staff attempted to gather information on their enemy, but all the Empire was able to give them at this point was that they were a collection of small-scale pirate gangs.
One of his people told him, “There don’t seem to be any noteworthy pirates among them. It looks like just a bunch of small fries banded together. What I’m curious about, though, are the ships that appear to belong to the fleets of nobles… We can’t tell which houses yet, however. What should we do?”
Nobles were known to engage in piracy from time to time, for various reasons like making money or plundering the domain of nobles they were in conflict with. The Empire tended to deal with such instances delicately. If one house crushed the enemy house too thoroughly, it could set off a larger-scale conflict due to the hurt pride of the defeated noble.
However, House Banfield had a different way of doing things. Since Liam had zero tolerance for pirates, his military followed his lead and showed no mercy to anyone engaging in piracy, regardless of potential consequences.
“Does that look like another noble’s military to you? That’s not good. That’s disrespectful, you know. No noble would stain his hands with the likes of piracy.”
“I apologize for my rudeness, sir.”
It was a bald-faced exchange between the two of them, but they fully intended to deal with the opposing armies the same as they would pirates, regardless of whether or not there were noble military ships among them. That was House Banfield’s policy, and even though Liam wasn’t present or aware of the attack, that wouldn’t change.
The commander announced, “Pirates have come to attack the world we’ve put so much work into, people. Intercept them at once.”
His words dispelled the men’s confusion, and they went about responding to the situation as their training dictated. The defensive force would not panic and would simply carry out their duties whether they were massively outnumbered or not. After all, their greater number was the only advantage the enemy had over them.
The commander gave further orders to members of the control room’s crew. “Quickly evacuate noncombatants from this vessel so we can get up there

and meet the attack as a defensive base. Don't forget to contact our home planet as well."
Liam had purchased an absurdly huge fortress-class vessel from the Seventh Weapons Factory on impulse after catching a glimpse of Nias's sports bra. The great ship had been stationed on the developing planet to act as a ground base, but now the commander wanted to take it aloft to join the rest of his fleet.
The ship was of superior performance in every way and was basically a mobile fortress. It had been constructed from the ground up like a stationary fort, very much unlike the repurposed asteroids that pirates tended to use as their forts. The craft was in the shape of an immense sphere, thus capable of attacking in any direction. In addition to this, all the ships and mobile knights the defensive force now deployed were of the same quality as those in use by the Imperial army. They were far more capable than anything the pirates would have.
The commander continued to feel disbelief as he studied the enemy's fleet on the main screen. "There are still pirates keen on picking a fight with us, *and* they're attacking our fortress-class with only six thousand ships? Are they idiots?"
Even six thousand ships would never be enough to take down a vessel of that size.

***

Commanding the mixed fleet of six thousand ships was a military officer of House Berkeley who was a veteran of space piracy.
"Why do they have a monster like that stationed at a damn frontier planet? Are they idiots?"
The fortress-class ship had joined the battle, and on his bridge's main screen he watched the spherical vessel obliterate his allies one after another. Each report he received from his subordinates made him grimace in consternation.
One of his bridge operators cried out, "Commander, none of our attacks are getting through! They're advancing on us with the fortress-class as their shield!"
"What?! This is insanity!"
Normally, a fortress-class ship would stay in one place and not move much, but this monstrosity was at the front of the pack. This being the case, the mongrel fleet of allies had no choice but to retreat. Even as they fled, however, House Banfield's force mercilessly shot them down, and soon the mixed fleet was reduced to about half its original size.
All around the bridge, his people shouted out reports.
"I-it's no good. All of our allies are breaking off and fleeing."
"Our mobile knight squadron can't penetrate the fortress-class!"
"Sir, we just spotted enemy reinforcements! Fifteen thousand of them!"

The commander Derrick had entrusted with overseeing the attack snatched the hat off his head and threw it to the floor. “We’re surrendering! Open communications with them!”
The operator did as ordered, but soon turned to the commander wearing a look of despair. “S-Sir, they’ve responded. ‘We don’t negotiate with pirates,’ was all they said”
“What? Do they not know we’re the Berkeley Family? Goddamned country bumpkin nobles!”
The commander couldn’t believe that House Banfield wouldn’t accept their surrender. Any other noble would have let them off the hook at this point, but House Banfield seemed intent on destroying them to the last man.
“Lord Derrick has entrusted us with *that* thing. We’ve gotta get out of here no matter what it takes, all right? Even if it’s just us, we have to survive this!”
“Commander, the enemy!”
The moment the commander decided to abandon his allies, his ship received a direct hit from an energy beam that reduced him and his entire crew to ash.

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The fortress-class and the rest of the defense force endured until the House Banfield reinforcements arrived, and between their two waves of ships the remaining enemy was crushed completely. The pirates pleaded for their lives, but they were ignored, and soon there were no more enemy voices over the lines of communication.
However, the defensive force already had the enemy on the ropes, so by the time the allies arrived, the enemy had already begun to flee. Those that missed their chance just ended up boxed in by House Banfield’s reinforcements.
Still perplexed, the commander of the defensive force cocked his head and said, “What were they even trying to do in the first place?”
Derrick’s mixed fleet had been annihilated, failing catastrophically in their attempt to destroy Liam’s frontier planet.

Chapter 4:
Assassins

THREE MEN in matching uniforms patrolled the dorms of the First Campus. They met up at an intersection of hallways, making small talk as they continued together toward their destination.

“Nothing looks out of the ordinary back there.”

“Everything was good on my end, too.”

“Let’s do this and get out of here already.”

The student dorms housed many noble children and employed experienced knights as guards. After all, many of the students here were from quite important families. As a result, there was nothing strange about several knights walking through the dorm’s halls at this time of night.

From the shadows of the three knights, a man with a black mask appeared without a sound. The man wore a reddish-brown cloak, with the red becoming more pronounced toward his feet. Large though he was, his hands seemed even larger than they should be based on the size of his head. His eyes could be seen through the holes in his black mask, and were red as well.

The man was obviously suspicious, and when the knights spotted him, the three drew weapons from their waists.

“Who are you? How’d you get in here?!”

The well-trained guards were poised for a fight, but the large cloaked man simply held up his empty hands and greeted them in a carefree tone.

“Good evening! It’s a nice night, isn’t it?”

At that moment, other men dressed in the same manner as he appeared behind the knights. They seemed to pop up out of the shadows, and soon the trio was surrounded.

“A-are you assassins?” one of the knights demanded, taking a step forward.

The moment the knight moved, one of the cloaked men threw a knife that struck him in the forehead, killing him instantly.

“They know what they’re doing!”

“I’ll kill you, dammit!” cried one of the two remaining knights.

“No! Wait, don’t just rush them!” his partner shouted.

The furious knight leapt forward, overwhelmed by his fear, but a cloaked man immediately dropped him with another throwing knife. He fell to the ground and sank into the shadows of their attackers.

“Just my luck,” the last knight said.

The eerie group overwhelmed him and restrained him on the floor.

The large, cloaked man gave a throaty chuckle. “Terribly sorry for interrupting your work, but I’ve got some business to attend to, so you’ll have to excuse me.”

The dorm the cloaked men had appeared in housed male students, including Liam. The large man vanished from that spot as if he had sunk into the floor and reappeared inside Liam's room.

Liam was in bed, snoring quietly. The large man reached out to him…and pulled the loose blanket up to cover the boy's shoulders.

Liam opened his eyes. He appeared to have been aware of the intruder from the beginning.

"That was quite a commotion, Kukuri."

The large man called Kukuri sank to one knee and bowed his head deeply.

"I apologize for waking you, Master Liam. Some noisy dogs got in, so we were driving them off."

"Dogs? If they're someone's pets, make sure you return them to their owner."

"As you wish, Master Liam." Kukuri was a suspicious-looking character, but he worked for Liam.

Kukuri disappeared, sinking into the floor, and reappeared at the place where his men had brought the captured knight. He looked down at the sole survivor of the trio and spoke to him in a much more mocking tone than he'd used with Liam.

"We can't have people sneaking into the dorms dressed as security now, can we? And even worse, you were after Master Liam's life!"

The captive trembled with fear, but he made no attempt to respond. He was indeed an assassin who'd meant to take Liam out, having sneaked into the dorm in the uniform of a security guard.

"I have an idea of who sent you here, but I'd like to make sure first. Please look me in the eyes."

Kukuri's red eyes glowed ominously, and the assassin's face suddenly emptied of emotion. In an entranced voice, he informed Kukuri about his employer. "We were hired by Lord Derrick. He ordered us to capture Liam and torture him."

When they heard that, Kukuri's men took out their knives, eyes burning with bloodlust. Their shadows squirmed, an eerie creaking sound coming from them.

“Wait,” Kukuri cautioned them, holding up a hand, and the men lowered their weapons. “Master Liam’s orders were to deliver this dog to his owner. Why don’t we take the opportunity to dress him up a little first?”
Kukuri laughed eerily, and his men followed suit.
The assassin came back to his senses and began to sweat profusely at the unsettling group before him. “Wh-who are you guys? I’ve been in this business a long time, but I’ve never seen anyone like you!”
Kukuri tilted his head to the side and introduced himself. “Who are we? Well…you could call us a clan that was supposed to have been destroyed. Or maybe a clan that’s come back from the past? It has nothing to do with you, in any case. Now, we’ll just escort you back to your owner. Let’s just get you looking nice and pretty first!”
Kukuri’s huge hands reached out for the man.
“N-nooooo!” the assassin screamed.
“Now, now,” Kukuri whispered to him. “You tried to bring harm to Master Liam. For that, you *and* your master clearly deserve death.”

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The next morning…
“Gyaaaaa!”
Derrick awoke to the scream of one of the dorms’ servants. He rose, holding his head.
“Shut up… I’ve got a hangover! My head’s killing me! Who the hell’s screaming? I’ll execute you, so step forw—eep?”
He spotted an object that should not have been in his room, and when he realized what it was, he screamed just as that servant had. It was the trio of assassins he’d sent after Liam, but they’d been transformed into a single grotesque work of art.
“Eeek! Someone, clean that up!”
The monstrous artwork repulsed Derrick. He didn’t want to believe that it existed inside his room. It was enough to make him forget his hangover. His heart raced at the sight.
Wh-when…? When did they sneak in here?
Security in the student dorms was tight, and it was doubly so for Derrick, considering that he’d planned on abducting and torturing Liam. He’d hired some extremely skilled knights whose sole function was to defend him, and yet this horrid art piece had been left here without anyone even noticing. How could this have happened?
The knights flew into the room at Derrick’s scream. They were left speechless by the sight that greeted them. The servant who’d entered earlier started to vomit.
“Are you all right, Lord Derrick?”
“D-do I look all right? I just pissed myself! A-anyway, hurry and clean this up!”

“Wait… We need to report this to the school,” one of the knights said. Derrick quickly stopped him.
“A-are you stupid?! These are the guys I sent after Liam! They’re not even supposed to be here! *I’m* gonna be the one in trouble if it gets out that this happened!”
Derrick knew that if someone were to look into this, *he* would be the one in trouble. Plus, the people who had so brazenly broken into his room obviously worked for Liam. Their art piece was a message for him that said, “We could kill you at any time.”
Derrick held his head. Damnit! The whole fleet I scraped together got wiped out, my brothers are pissed as hell at me, and I lost that thing, too! How am I even gonna recover from this?
With his personal fleet annihilated, Derrick had lost most of his sway within the Family. His brothers were making demands of him and nothing was going his way anymore. And worst of all, he’d lost *that*. There was even the possibility the Family might simply eliminate him now.
“What? *Damn it all!* Why the hell does he have a fortress-class?!”
He couldn’t believe the planet he’d sent his fleet to was being guarded by a fortress-class ship. It was unthinkable that someone would station such an asset to protect a mere frontier planet. Only the regular army or a small number of top nobles even had one at all. If he’d known he’d be dealing with a monster like that, Derrick would never have attacked that planet.
“This is gonna affect my reputation. I’ll have to get rid of Liam with my own two hands, somehow.”
By this point, Derrick was already a fourth-year student at the primary school, with Liam being a second-year. If he didn’t take care of this matter soon, before he graduated, his siblings would move in and take care of it instead. If that happened, Derrick would be deemed useless and he’d lose his place in the Family for sure.
“I-I know! The tournament. If I get rid of Liam there, I can uphold my reputation. He’ll enter that for sure. The tournament’s a dangerous event, and if someone were to get hurt, well…”
It was always understood that the worst might occur during these battles between formidable mobile knights. Students couldn’t participate unless they knowingly accepted the possibility of death. Derrick began to plot just how he would kill Liam in that tournament.

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Things had been rather noisy around me lately. Apparently, some dogs had sneaked into the dorms during the night. *Dogs, eh?* I owned one in my previous life, so I hoped they got back to their owner safely.
I thought about this Kukuri guy I’d recently assigned to my personal security team. His name struck me as being amusingly cute, considering how he looked. Yeah, Kukuri is too cute for this huge guy with such a

sinister aura. I gave him points for reporting the incident with the dogs, since it suggested he knew I was fond of them. Like Marie, Kukuri was another one of the petrified people I'd liberated, and he was a really great find, just like her.

In any case, I was now in my second year at primary school, but classes weren't all that different from how they'd been in year one. At this point, I was really getting tired of them. That was why lately I'd been spending all my time thinking about how to get Rosetta to submit to me.

The noble lady's only solace was in her family's status, though they were a dukedom in name only. House Claudia was poor, but their peerage at least was legitimate. Like Wallace had said, her family had been suffering for two thousand years because of some pig-headed emperor in the past. There was a limit to how pig-headed you could be…but since House Claudia still held their heads high in the face of their accursed situation, they must have had truly noble spirits! And if I could crush that noble spirit, I bet it'd be really entertaining.

"Won't be easy, though…"

I wanted the stubborn girl to bow before me, and then I would step on her head. That would make me the picture-perfect evil lord. For my inspiration, I had in mind some of the villains in the period dramas my old friend Nitta used to describe to me.

It would probably be hard to break her pride with money. Of course, it was only fun because that wasn't likely to break her, but that meant I had to think of another strategy. I may have been a count, but she was a future duchess, money or no. It would be difficult to leverage my position because as a duchess-to-be she was technically of higher rank, but then again, Rosetta's family had no actual influence. They were looked down upon so much that no one was likely to say anything no matter what I did. And the fact that Rosetta still held her head high despite her situation was the best thing about her.

As I sat in the classroom muttering to myself, Wallace caught sight of me and grimaced. "Someone's in a good mood."

"Well, I'm enjoying myself right now." Fantasies of how to make a haughty noble lady submit to me had been amusing me quite a bit lately.

"I don't understand how you think, Liam. I spend every day in anxiety."

What a weak-hearted character. He acts critical of me, but every time he squanders all his allowance, he comes and pesters me for more. In fact, he did that only yesterday! How bad is this guy's ability to plan if he runs out of funds with more than half a month remaining until his next pay day? Does he even recognize his position as my underling? He doesn't just think of me as his walking bank, does he? I'd like for him to come in handy for me every once in a while, but is there anything this guy is actually good for? I'm beginning to regret becoming his patron now. No, wait a second…

"Hey, Wallace."

"Yes? You're increasing my allowance?"

I smacked him on the back of the head. “I want to know a way to raise my peerage, and one that takes as little time as possible. You’re an Imperial prince… You must know something about that.”
“Raising your peerage? If you don’t want it to take time, then…” Wallace folded his arms and contemplated my question, but he came up with an answer quickly. “Well, buying it would be the quickest way.”
“What, the Empire just sells peerage? How much is it?”
“Well, not exactly. You’d be buying it from other houses.”
According to Wallace, plenty of houses were nobility in name only. In other words, houses like my own House Banfield had been under the rotten leadership of my father and his father before him. Even if they had no real worth other than their name, there were other houses who still desired their peerage. Conversely, there were other houses that had real value but low peerage. One way a house like that could elevate its rank was to take on the peerage of another house. If a house was willing to sell its peerage, it first passed its power on to one of its children, after which the buying house took in that child through marriage. The child conveyed its peerage to their husband or wife, and thus the buying family obtained a higher peerage.
Was that really okay? There was one big problem with this method, however; houses with no real power tended to be swimming in debt to the Empire.
“Since the purchasing house pays off these debts and whatever other issues the house has, the Empire acknowledges the legitimacy of the peerage transfer.”
When I heard this, I got an idea. You can buy peerage if you have the cash…
I’d been unsatisfied with my social position for a little while now. Being a count was nothing special when there were so many other nobles with the same title. Dukes and duchesses were a level above, and conveniently here before me was a vulnerable noble of that rank. My idea was this: if I stole the one thing Rosetta clung to, her peerage, I should be able to break her spirit with the added bonus of becoming a duke.
“So to put it simply, if I pay off a poor house’s debt and take a wife from them, I can raise my peerage?”
Wallace nodded. “You could. In your current position, there’s a limit to how high you could rise, though. Things are a little different for a margrave, but… Anyway, you’re going to pay off some other house’s debts? If you can do that, then you could raise my allowance, can’t you?”
I shut Wallace up with a flick to the forehead and began to formulate my plans. If I just walked up to Rosetta and told her, “Hand over the peerage you’re going to inherit,” the only thing I’d be getting would be a glare with those cold eyes of hers. While I enjoyed seeing her rebellious attitude flare up, what I really wanted to see was her fall into despair. I wanted to watch her face when she finally realized I’d stolen the only thing she had to be proud about.

I thought back on the people in my last life who laughed at my anguished face when I was in despair. Now it was my turn to do the laughing.
I stood up from my chair, so Wallace followed suit.
“Going to the bathroom? I’ll go too, then.”
Hold on, why are you going to the bathroom with me? And now I see Kurt’s standing up, too. Why do these guys like going to the bathroom together so much? I notice Eila’s watching me and Kurt, and she looks really happy for some reason. What’s she blushing about? And why is she shooting glares at Wallace?
I told Wallace, “I’ve got an idea, and I need to contact home. I’m not going to the bathroom, so don’t come with me.”
In our classroom, I saw Rosetta sitting off by herself, hanging her head. I thought it was great that she was always so aloof and withdrawn. Those dunce-like grades she got were perfect too. She wasn’t athletic at all. Despite all this, she seemed to try so hard.
Oh, icy Rosetta, you pauper noble whose only strength is your pride. I think you’re just great.

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In the palace on the Capital Planet, the prime minister was hard at work as usual when he received an emergency communication from Serena, who was still undercover at House Banfield. Thinking there must be some trouble, he accepted the call right away.
“What is it? Is there a problem?”
“I felt I should tell you this as soon as possible. Lord Liam is considering a marriage with House Claudia.”
When he heard this, the prime minister’s eyes widened, and he shook his head. He would never have imagined Liam choosing to marry into House Claudia, of all families. Such a union wouldn’t benefit him in any way. At the same time, however, he almost felt like Liam was the only noble the troubled House Claudia could be entrusted to.
“Anyone would think he’s making a serious mistake, but I also feel as if a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”
The Empire’s harsh treatment of House Claudia was something that had been decided by an emperor a very long time ago, and many people were uncomfortable with such an unfair arrangement. The prime minister was one such person, but the damage was so deep he hadn’t known how it might be rectified. Since House Claudia was a dukedom in name only, and anything but prosperous, they were saddled with a massive debt and couldn’t clear the stain on their reputation for having opposed a member of the Imperial family. An immense amount of power would be required to help them, and yet whoever did so wouldn’t gain anything in return.
Serena seemed shocked by Liam’s intentions and was flustered as she made her report to the prime minister. “At Liam’s request, Brian has already

contacted the head of House Claudia. They seem suspicious right now, but they'll likely reach an agreement soon when they see that Liam is serious about this."
"House Claudia has no reason to decline."
Naturally, House Claudia would be suspicious of the offer, since they'd been tormented by other noble houses for such a long time, but they were unlikely to get another offer like this ever again. For them, this would be their last chance. The prime minister was certain that when they realized it was no cruel joke, they would accept the marriage proposal quickly.
He said, "I'll personally advise them to accept."
"You're not going to stop them?!" Liam's decision was so strange and out of the blue that Serena had wanted the prime minister's take on it, but she was shocked by his reaction.
"I'm sure you are aware that House Claudia has endured enough."
"Surely there are more advantageous matches for him, though. Don't you think you should introduce him to a daughter from one of the houses you're close with?"
"That would have been fine, of course, but this pairing would make the more open-minded nobles take notice of House Banfield. I wonder if that's what he's after?"
Serena was confused to see the prime minister smile. *"What is it, sir?"*
The prime minister believed he had hit upon Liam's aim. "Well, I thought he was being foolish when I heard he was antagonizing House Berkeley, but he must be thinking several steps ahead. First, he befriends Prince Wallace, and now this with House Claudia, eh? If he's opposing House Berkeley, then it makes sense to align himself with nobles who also resent that family."
"Opposing… Is that what he's doing?"
Serena realized what the prime minister suspected, and now both of them were of the belief that all these decisions by Liam were pieces of a larger calculation on his part.
House Claudia would be difficult to help and aiding them would gain Liam nothing in return. There should be no merit in doing so…but that wasn't strictly true. Liam's name would become known by those nobles who were of a just mind if he helped the unjustly persecuted House Claudia. In fact, his reputation would likely skyrocket with those houses.
And if he seriously intended to oppose House Berkeley, the prime minister couldn't be happier. "All of these issues that have been left unresolved for too long are being tidied up, one after another. Let's allow the count to continue his good work."
"The palace will support this marriage proposal, then?"
"Absolutely. The Empire will profit and finally wash its hands of its guilt. And if a powerful count becomes a duke and continues to support the Empire, what else is there to do but welcome that? The Empire has fallen a bit too far into disrepair. I've been hoping we could get things to run more

as they should, and Liam could be the fresh blood we need to make that happen."
Serena wasn't fully convinced, but she had to accept the prime minister's stance on the matter. *"I shall tell them that the palace supports Lord Liam in this matter, then."*
"Please do."
Their communication ended, and the prime minister murmured, "Count Banfield… I am expecting much from you."

Chapter 5:
Steel Claudia

As she went through her days at primary school, Rosetta's spirit seemed ever closer to breaking, just as her mother and grandmother's dreams had been dashed when they were confronted by harsh reality during their time at school. In their society, some circumstances seemed impossible to overcome, no matter how hard one worked. Rosetta saw now that restoring House Claudia by herself was an entirely unattainable dream.

"All I wanted to do was get ahead and escape from that pathetic life."

She had wanted to escape from her family's unending hell. If her family was only poor, that would be one thing, but she couldn't accept that she existed only to be mocked just because of some ancient feud.

By the time her second year at primary school was close to an end, the gap between her grades and those of her classmates couldn't possibly be bridged. She could understand almost nothing that was taught in class, and she couldn't hope to compete with even the smallest girls in her physical training and martial arts programs.

No matter how hard she worked, the gap only widened, even though she worked much harder than her peers. And said peers were clearly slacking off while somehow still managing to be more talented than her. It was enough to make her wonder if her classmates were even human.

Rosetta sat on her bed, hugging her knees, the light gone from her eyes.

"I've had enough of this. If all I ever had to look forward to was feeling this miserable, I wish I had never been born."

She remembered the sad looks on her mother's and grandmother's faces when they saw her off to primary school and the pain in their eyes. Still, they'd had to send her, and when they did, they told her, "You can't give up." It had been unbearable. Not doing all she could would have only deepened her family's disgrace. That was why she wanted to succeed so badly: to get ahead in the Empire, and to save House Claudia.

"Dreaming of something I could never possibly achieve… I'm so pathetic."

The crushing reality she'd learned when she came to primary school was that it wasn't a question of winning or losing. It wasn't even a contest. Rosetta's heart was in a highly fragile state, as though it would shatter at any moment.

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Whenever Rosetta came to class, Liam would always talk to her in an overly familiar manner.

"You don't look too well, Rosetta. Are you getting enough to eat?"

"Stay away from me. How many times do I have to tell you?"

“Eh, I’m not counting. You look really pale, though.”
Liam reached out to her, but Rosetta slapped his hand away.
“I’m fine. Are you satisfied? You can leave now.”
Rosetta’s spirit might’ve been close to crumbling, but she still maintained her proud attitude of resistance when it came to Liam. However, he had been extremely persistent lately. And on top of that, House Banfield had formally proposed to House Claudia a match between Liam and Rosetta. She figured the engagement was his own idea, though, and this was why he’d been so persistent with her of late. Nevertheless, Rosetta found it difficult to believe he would go that far and be that serious about it.
What on earth is he thinking, proposing an engagement to me? There’s nothing in it for him.
Liam smiled flippantly and kept up his pestering of Rosetta. “Don’t be so cold. I’m worried about you.”
He said he was worried, but his expression suggested he was enjoying himself.
He’s just the same as all those other nobles who have watched us like hawks. He’ll betray me, I’m sure of it. I will never trust him!
Since Liam always seemed like he was teasing her when he interacted with her, Rosetta always responded coldly.
“I don’t need your worry.”
Rosetta maintained a firm attitude with Liam so that he wouldn’t be able to tell how close her spirit was to breaking. She had to act tough in front of him since he represented her ideal. In reality, her spirit was on the verge of shattering, and she wanted nothing more than to just stay locked up in her room. Rosetta was doing her best to endure for as long as she possibly could.
Still, no matter how cold she was to him, Liam kept up his overly familiar attitude with her. In some secret way, that made Rosetta just a little bit happy.
“That’s too bad,” he said. “How about lunch, then?”
“I will once again decline your invitation.”
“You really are stubborn. Guess I’ll ask again tomorrow, then.”
She turned him down every time he asked, but Liam never seemed to become bitter or dissuaded. She knew he was likely just teasing her, but Rosetta had never had a friend her age who acted this way with her. In truth, these little conversations with Liam were friendly diversions that served to support her in this harsh environment.
Every so often, it took everything she had not to fall against him and cry to try and relieve her emotional burdens. Whenever those feelings reared their heads, she held them down. Today, like every other day, she shoved the urge to plead to Liam for help deep down into her heart, and Rosetta treated him coldly again.
“If you don’t need anything, could you please just leave me be?”
“You really are interesting, Rosetta.”

Rosetta watched Liam return to his own seat and then hung her head. She bit her lip. You can't expect anything from him, Rosetta, she told herself. Don't trust anyone who isn't family. Everyone has betrayed you up until now, haven't they? You can't get your hopes up. That'll only make it hurt more when he betrays you too.

She had been tormented by others countless times in the past, to the point where being able to trust someone seemed an impossibility. She'd had friends in childhood, but that group of Observers the emperor had put in place ages ago to keep House Claudia in check still worked their machinations behind the scenes, and they manipulated her friends into betraying her in terrible ways. This hadn't happened just once or twice. Every time she made a new friend, she dreaded the day they would inevitably turn their back on her, if not openly mock her. Eventually, she'd stopped expecting anything at all from other people.

How can I dare be hopeful now…and with Liam, of all people?

She was completely baffled by herself, because despite all her past experiences, part of her still prayed that Liam could alter her life.

***

Liam's persistent bothering of Rosetta was becoming a familiar sight in their classroom. Today as Eila watched him, two other girls nearby were having a conversation about it. She hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help overhearing them.

"What's with her attitude? She really thinks she can act all stuck-up with him?"

Rosetta may have technically been a future duchess, but because of her house's poor standing her peers had never been afraid to speak ill of her. However, another student rushed over to the pair and warned them to watch their words.

"Cut it out. Are you trying to pick a fight with Liam?"

"N-no, we weren't…"

"You should steer clear of Rosetta, then," said this third student. "If you make Liam angry, it'll be over for your whole house. You've heard the rumors about House Banfield, haven't you?"

"I've heard it's an ideal domain that's kind to its subjects."

"You idiot. They say if you get into a fight with him, he'll obliterate your whole fleet, even if it belongs to a noble house. He's kind to his subjects, yeah, but he shows no mercy to his enemies, so be careful."

"Okay, I won't say anything else… Stop trying to scare me!"

Rumors about House Banfield had been spreading through the primary school. Everyone knew that he had made an enemy of Derrick and that he truly showed no mercy to pirates, while at the same time knowing that he was a wise ruler who was good to his people. Why, though, would speaking ill of Rosetta mean picking a fight with Liam?

Eila lowered her chin to rest on her desk and sighed, mulling over that very question. *People don't bully Rosetta anymore.* Previously, there had been several incidents of bullying against her at the school, but Liam's interference had put a stop to them. There was no one who would laugh at her anymore. Eila had heard that Liam had announced Rosetta was off limits, because she was *his* prey. Some idiots had thought this meant Liam planned on bullying her, and they offered to join forces with him in that, but one dangerous glare from Liam had shut them right up.

Who was the scariest person at the primary school? It wasn't any of the teachers, and it wasn't even a delinquent like Derrick. It was Liam. Not even the upperclassmen on the same campus would dare get on his bad side. Despite this, Liam didn't terrorize other students like Derrick did. Normally, he was a diligent student, and if you didn't pick a fight with him, he wouldn't do anything to harm you. The First Campus was actually a peaceful place because of his influence.

Yes, oddly he'd referred to Rosetta as his "prey," but from anyone else's point of view, it was clear he was protecting her. The general consensus was that Liam despised malicious bullying of any kind.

I never thought Rosetta would catch Liam's eye, though… I want to believe Kurt is the only one for him, but I suppose as a count he has to keep up appearances. Ooh, actually, this might be great material for an "outward appearances only" kind of marriage!

Eila wasn't close to Rosetta, but it wasn't as if she disliked her. Rosetta was just a person who was hard to get to know.

Well, this is probably a good deal for Rosetta. Liam had to go and pick a real troublesome house though. Normally, you wouldn't want anything to do with them. Well, whatever. I'll just go on fantasizing about Liam and Kurt.

Eila's fantasies were as vivid as ever, from watching Liam and Kurt spending time together again today. Her cheeks flushed with excitement as she took some footage of them with a tiny drone she was flying around the classroom.

Ahh, this is what keeps me going. When I'm doing this, I can forget all of life's bad stuff and be content.

Eila was a girl who enjoyed seeing and imagining the love between two men, and her number one pairing was Liam and Kurt.

Once again today, the arrogant Liam forces the serious and somewhat timid Kurt to—hey!

While Eila was in the process of reading too much into a normal conversation between the two boys, a "contaminant" disrupted their interaction. It was Wallace.

"Liam, can you *please* raise my allowance?"

Wallace came across to Eila as a frivolous playboy trying to ask for more pocket change. Seeing him worm his way between the two friends, she could barely restrain her anger.

Why do you keep getting between Liam and Kurt? You're the type to try to steal someone already in a relationship, aren't you? You're so lazy and sloppy that stealing someone's lover is probably the only thing you're good at, right? If you're in the picture, I can't help but imagine all sorts of terrible scenarios! Ohh, Liam or Kurt is going to be stolen—Aaaaaaaaaah! I imagined iiiiit!

Some of Eila's fantasies were pretty extreme anyway, but that didn't change the fact that Wallace was getting in the way of them.

There are all sorts of heretics interested in things like cheating now, too! How dare they destroy my happiness, dammit! I wish there were some lawful way I could just get rid of Wallace!

Her bliss interrupted, Eila was livid with frustration and held her head. She wracked her brain, trying to come up with some legitimate way to separate Wallace from the two of them.

Meanwhile, those around Eila were somewhat put off by the sight.

"Eila's writhing around again…"

***

In a faculty room at the primary school, a number of teachers were having a discussion.

"Is it all right to leave things as they are with Miss Claudia?"

Mr. John wasn't sure how to answer the question. "It's hard to watch her struggle. Please look out for her if you can."

It wasn't as though the primary school was purposely making Rosetta miserable in order to bully her, but things had just worked out that way. The biggest problem was the difference in abilities between her and the other students. It wasn't Rosetta's fault; it was simply a matter of financial and political power. She wasn't personally to blame for falling behind the others. In fact, the teachers knew she was working hard, so they couldn't reprimand her, even if she couldn't keep up with the lessons. But of course, to Rosetta, it just seemed like the teachers were looking down on her.

"Why not let her take a bit of a break?" one of the other teachers suggested out of sympathy for her. "At this rate, she's on track for the worst to happen."

Mr. John shook his head. He didn't particularly disagree with the suggestion, but it just wasn't possible. "We've already gotten complaints from the Observers for being too lax with House Claudia. It'll be difficult to do anything more for her than what we're already doing."

The descendants of the group put together by that ancient emperor's decree to keep an eye on House Claudia were still carrying out their ancestors' duties. One might think their official role was a noble undertaking, but this duty of theirs was to maliciously harass House Claudia with the express purpose of making them as miserable as possible. The organization had been made up of sadistic individuals from the very start,

and it had only become more warped as time went on. It was a gathering of people who gleefully thought up all sorts of ways to break people's spirits. These Observers would bombard the school with further complaints if they allowed Rosetta to take a break. "You dare oppose the orders of the late emperor?" they would say. Threatened with such things, the teachers couldn't defy the Observers. Despite having been formed on the whim of one emperor, they'd been around for such a long time that they had maintained a certain amount of influence. This was why the school couldn't let up the pressure on Rosetta.
"There must be something we can do…"
The teaching staff were powerless to help her.
"B-bad news!" Another teacher suddenly ran into the faculty room.
Mr. John looked over at the newcomer. "What is it?"
"It's the next mobile knight tournament! Both Lord Derrick and Lord Liam have applied to participate!"
The teachers all stood from their seats when they heard that.
"We have to stop them!"
Liam had already injured Derrick once before. He was usually quite well-behaved as a student, but he was well-known for showing no mercy when up against pirates. If he and Derrick were to clash in mobile knights, something very bad was bound to happen.
"We'll just have to have Lord Liam withdraw. I don't want to think about what could happen otherwise."
The teacher who had brought this news shook his head. "Lord Derrick has demanded that Lord Liam participate. He made his demands quite clear…"
Mr. John decided to report this to his boss right away. "It's just one thing after another lately…"

***

Ultimately, the news from the primary school found its way to the prime minister's desk. He wished he could tell people not to bring him news of every little thing, but when he saw the names on the report, he was forced to acknowledge that this was a problem too big for the school to handle on its own.
"This should be interesting. I give my approval."
The messenger who'd brought him the report was Liam's new head knight, Tia. As part of her training, she was currently working for the prime minister.
"Thank you very much, sir. I'm sure Lord Liam will be pleased to hear it."
"Incidentally, Christiana, have you given further thought to my offer?" The prime minister had invited her to work directly for the Empire, a testament to just how capable she was.

Most knights would be overjoyed to receive such an invitation, but Tia declined it immediately. “There’s no need to think about it. I believe I told you before that I’m not interested.”
The prime minister backed off when she said so. “That’s too bad. I could use as many talented workers as I can get.”
“Lord Liam is the only master for me.”
Since Tia’s words were truly heartfelt, the prime minister had to give up on her. It made him all the more impressed with Liam that Tia thought so highly of him.
“The count must truly be something special, if such a talented knight is so faithful to him.”
“Of course he is.”
Nevertheless, the prime minister remained a bit disappointed. He truly thought Tia would be a tremendous asset to the empire. In fact, he thought she even had the potential to become a candidate for his successor, after gaining the experience of a hundred years or so.
“Now then, this tournament will likely spark a full-on conflict between House Banfield and House Berkeley. Are you prepared for that, Christiana?”
Liam and Derrick were about to fight. There had already been one confrontation, but the tournament would no doubt spark the Berkeley Family into taking action, and a real conflict between two major powers in the Empire would take place.
Tia never doubted Liam’s chances at victory. “Absolutely. Lord Liam would never make an incorrect decision. And even if he did make a mistake, I’d still bring him victory.”
“I see.”
She’s dependable, but perhaps she has a bit too much faith in him.
The prime minister found Tia’s blind faith in Liam to be dangerous and began to think that maybe it was right not to recruit the woman from him.
“Very well. Cause some mayhem. The Empire will accept the outcome.”
When House Banfield and House Berkeley fought, who would emerge victorious? Even the prime minister couldn’t really predict the results of that contest.
The Berkeleys have the overwhelming advantage in scale, but the count has always won battles that weren’t in his favor. Personally, I’d like to believe he can do it again this time.
On the inside, he was rooting for the upright and just House Banfield, but he couldn’t play favorites and give his direct support to one family due to his position as prime minister. He would have to approve of the results no matter who won.
In any case, a long battle is about to begin.
Battles between nobles were not always fought with weapons. They began quietly, with economic conflicts or assassinations. Many nobles benefitted from interactions with House Berkeley and they’d likely support them in a

conflict, which would harm Liam's chances. No matter how strong Liam was by himself, without allies, he could easily lose.
It all comes down to how many people grow backbones and come out in support of the count.
Liam's path to victory might well depend on whether the nobles and merchants who resented House Berkeley had enough courage to back him.
He'll have a shot if he secures some additional goodwill by helping House Claudia.

***

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Master Liam!" Brian bowed his head deeply to me through the monitor.
Rubbing my sleepy eyes, I urged him to continue his report as I rubbed my sleepy eyes.
"The current and previous heads of House Claudia both doubt the sincerity of your feelings, Master Liam. I'm so sorry to report that the marriage negotiations are not proceeding smoothly." Brian wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.
As I watched him, I thought about the current situation. Brian was very delicate and not the sort of man to look down on the other party and make unreasonable demands, so it was hard to imagine he could fail in a diplomatic matter.
Did that mean that House Claudia just didn't like me? They gave various reasons for their rejection of my offer, but did they see me as inferior? No matter how far they had fallen, the steel will of House Claudia would never break, eh? Fantastic! The rest of Rosetta's family must have been just as stubborn as she was.
"Keep up the negotiations, Brian, and make sure to be polite about it. We'll have to take our time buttering them up. Isn't that right, Brian? Show them we're sincere."
First, we'll play nice…but if that doesn't work, we'll use force. If we use force from the start, then it'll be over too fast. Where's the fun in that? No matter how stubborn this family is, I will make them submit!
"O-of course, sir. I-It's just…House Claudia is saying that no matter how strongly you say you feel about Lady Rosetta, they don't understand your reason for taking her as your first wife."
I'm not stupid enough to take them at their word. They should just be blunt about it. If I were to guess at what they really wanted to say, it would be something like… "We understand that you fell for Rosetta at first sight, but you can't be serious about marriage, can you? We're a dukedom, here! Know your place, you country bumpkin count!" You're very entertaining, House Claudia.
"Master Liam, do you really intend to take Lady Rosetta as your wife?"

I could guess what Brian was so worried about. He didn't think it was a good idea to take in someone like the daughter of House Claudia, a demon of justice with a steel will, when I was such an evil lord.
House Claudia was actually an incredible family. They stood up to a vindictive emperor and endured thousands of years of harassment for their trouble. Plus, they'd been led by women for so long they probably thought all men were trash.
Subduing a woman from a family like that would be fun, no doubt about it. I didn't care how much time it took…and in fact, I was looking forward to seeing how long she could hold out. There was no wife more fitting for an evil lord like me than Rosetta, who would stand beside me with her face ever twisted in frustration. After all, it wasn't like I placed much importance on having a for-real, affectionate type of wife in the first place.
"Do you have a problem with my decision, Brian?"
I had a fundamental dislike for anyone who complained about my decisions, but Brian had been serving my family for generations. I had to let him get away with a bit of grumbling.
"To be completely honest, I do. House Claudia has even more debt than House Banfield did previously. There isn't enough merit in this union for you and House Banfield. I have to oppose it from a standpoint of gains and losses."
Since I obtained the alchemy box, financial problems had become a non-issue for me. Plus, according to Amagi, even without taking the alchemy box into consideration, House Banfield had now achieved financial independence. Though I'd inherited a real mess from my father, I'd turned my domain around and made it prosperous. Since Amagi said all this, I was sure it was true.
"This matter is already decided. I don't intend to change my mind."
Brian's shoulders slumped when he heard this. Still, at the same time, he looked a little happy…or was that just my imagination?
"Very well, sir. I know I just raised my objections, but personally, I'd like you to know that I'm rooting for you, Master Liam."
"Are you?"
I cut the communication and stood up, stretching.
"Well, Brian seems to be on board now, so that's good. The ball's in your court now, Claudia Dukedom. I'm expecting a good show from you."

***

Meanwhile, a series of prototype tests were being carried out at the Seventh Weapons Factory. Boarding each experimental model was Marie, who had taken on the role of test pilot.
Marie's mobile knight tore through space at top speed, avoiding the debris floating around her. If she made a mistake, she could end up in a terrible accident, but Marie's control of the humanoid machine never faltered. The

voice that was being transmitted from her cockpit, however, did not sound like Marie's usual composed self.
"Goddamned troublemaker! Do what I tell you to or I'll smash you to pieces!"
She kept weaving through the floating debris, but there were a lot of unnecessary movements to her maneuvering. Those movements made it obvious how much trouble she was having as she piloted the craft.
Inside the ship, Nias ignored the angry remarks Marie was spewing and watched spellbound, cheeks flushed. What she was watching, of course, was the prototype Marie was piloting.
"It's amazing… I know it's just a prototype, but these mobile knights I've been creating are just so great, aren't they? Ohh… I'm just crazy for these specs. It's so nice being able to use as many rare metals as I want…"
With a near-unlimited budget and a mountain of rare materials, the machine was more like a mass of treasure than a prototype mobile knight.
Finished with the test run, Marie steered the prototype back to the ship. Over the communication feed, her voice was still heated, and her breathing frenzied. Even now at a reduced speed, she was clearly struggling to control the machine.
"Nias! You were gonna give Lord Liam a defective piece of junk like this, you bitch?! I'm sweating buckets trying to control this thing!"
Despite all the trouble she was having, it was clear that Marie's piloting was top-notch. But even someone of her skill couldn't handle the prototype. If a mere prototype was this challenging, what would piloting the Avid be like? It was possible that Marie wouldn't be able to move it much at all.
"It won't be a problem for Lord Liam. I plan to make his Avid even wilder."
"Are you insane?!"
In her frustration, Marie completely abandoned her typical way of speaking with Nias. She couldn't believe her own ears that the engineer intended to make the Avid even more challenging to control than the powerhouse she just finished testing. However, this was what Liam himself had asked for. He desired higher specs, even at the cost of usability.
"I assure you, I am quite sane. The controls are going to become insanely difficult in order to fulfill Lord Liam's requests. Or should I make it easier to pilot instead of the enhanced capabilities he asked for?"
When Nias provoked her, Marie glared back at her bitterly through the communications screen.
"So be it, then. I will master this craft and give you all the data you need. However, if you cannot satisfy Lord Liam with the Avid after I do all that… I will slaughter you and every one of your team."
"Yeah, yeah, go ahead."
When Nias remained unthreatened and confident, the knight backed off and returned her voice to its normal, professional tone.
"Your personality leaves something to be desired, but I do commend your skills and courage."

Nias was stunned for a moment. “Huh?”
Marie had top-notch skills, but there were obviously issues with her personality, and her tendency for violent talk was especially over the top. Nias’s opinion of Marie was that she was a valuable pilot who could control difficult crafts like they were a part of her body, but that she could use a bit more control of herself. Marie saying that *Nias’s* personality left something to be desired made the engineer pause for a moment, disbelieving what she just heard.
Collecting herself, Nias checked her tablet for the data she just collected on the prototype. “Anyway, is that all you have to say about the ride? Any remarks other than how difficult it was to control?”
“None, though it pains me to admit it. Usability aside, its performance is nothing short of exceptional for a prototype unit. In fact, I might just make this my personal craft.”
“Sorry, but I’m gonna need more data on it first. Go ahead and come back when I’m done… Oh?”
Nias’s tablet had received some news on House Banfield. As Nias read the news report, Marie expressed interest in it as well.
“Is something the matter?”
“No, just… Lord Liam seems to have found a marriage partner at primary school.”
“What did you say?!”
Marie’s tone was agitated again. Nias thought to herself, *She better not go on another rampage…* Still, she explained the situation to the knight.
“Please stay calm. Lord Liam is a noble, you know…it’s nothing unusual. Plus, the girl seems to be a future duchess.”
“Who is this girl? If she’s to be a suitable match for Lord Liam, then not only must her family be investigated, but her own character must be scrutinized as well! How could such a matter be decided without first consulting me, a candidate for Lord Liam’s head knight?”
Marie was not actually Liam’s head knight, and Liam wasn’t the type to ask permission from anybody for things anyway.
Nias corrected her. “Isn’t Lord Liam’s head knight Lady Christiana?”
When Marie heard that, the pilot’s face seemed to transform into that of a demon’s. Once again, she abandoned her contrived dignified demeanor and shouted curses.
“That rotten-pile-of-ground-meat woman was only able to steal the position of head knight from me because Lord Liam happened to rescue her a little bit before he rescued me! I’ll turn her back to the way she was before he found her one of these days!”
Marie’s hatred of Tia had practically changed her into a different person entirely.
“That bitch even stole my signature colors! White and blue are my colors, goddammit! She won’t be staying head knight for long! I’ll turn her back into ground meat, I swear it!”

The ship's crew recoiled along with Nias at Marie's vitriol. Noticing their reaction, Marie chuckled shamelessly.
"Please do forgive me… I got a bit too emotional there. But you agree with me, Nias, do you not? That pile of ground meat would not make a good head knight for House Banfield."
"Mm, I'm not sure I'm qualified to say," replied Nias as she laughed off Marie's comment.
What am I even supposed to say to that? I'm not in any position to comment on House Banfield's affairs.
Marie assumed her calm demeanor once more and asked Nias more about Liam's marriage partner.
"So, which house does he plan on joining?"
"Uhh…the Claudia Dukedom, looks like. That's not a name you hear often."
When she heard the name, Marie's eyes widened. Her calm demeanor didn't last long, because she was now rather flustered.
"Did you say Claudia?"

***

My third year at primary school had begun.
I'd gotten permission to briefly leave campus to visit the Seventh Weapons Factory so I could check on my trusty Avid. My personal craft stood tall and imposing in the spacious hangar. It practically oozed confidence.
Marie, my test pilot, showed me around the facility she was now so familiar with.
"Just look, Lord Liam! There it is, your new and improved Avid!"
Marie was brimming with pride, and when I saw the machine myself, I could hardly blame her.
"Good work helping Nias get it into this state. A job well done."
"I am ecstatic to hear that from you."
So far, I was impressed with the Avid. It looked much grander than it used to, but…
"What are *you* doing?" I muttered, having spotted a certain waste of a pretty face.
Nias hadn't even noticed that I'd addressed her. She was clinging to a leg of the modified Avid like a cicada, rubbing her cheek against it.
"Oh, Avvy, you've gotten so cool and strong, haven't you? Mommy's so proud…"
Nias talked to the Avid like it was a baby. Watching her made me cringe. How was I even supposed to react to this behavior? Even an evil lord like me didn't know what to say to that. I guess modifying the Avid was a harder ask than I thought it was. She had always had a few screws loose, but Nias finally seemed to have lost it completely.
I looked up at the Avid again. Nothing radical had changed about its general form, but some details were a bit different. The frame and armor had all

been changed to rare metals, and Nias seemed to have paid special attention to the joints that had given me so much trouble in the past.
On Marie's tablet, I checked the Avid's performance specs, which were much higher than even those of the latest machines. I was pleased with the data, but the question now was how I would feel when I actually piloted the craft?
One thing about the Avid's enhanced appearance did let me down, though.
"Looking good, but I'm a little disappointed about one thing…"
Hearing this, Marie fell to her knees.
"Wh-what's not to your liking, Lord Liam?"
She really doesn't know? I guess I have to tell her, then.
"I'm sure I sent a ton of gold with all the other rare materials. The silver touches don't look bad against the black armor, but I prefer gold. Coat those parts again."
Nias suddenly turned to me with rage on her face. "Who the hell just said they were going to give my baby such a tacky color scheme?!"
…This chick just called my tastes tacky.
Marie shot back to her feet in an instant, her face expressionless. She drew the pistol-like weapons from her hip holsters, and blades appeared out of them. I guess the long, thin blades had been stored inside the grips. Hidden blades, eh? Badass.
Marie leapt over to Nias and mercilessly pressed the sharp edges to the other woman's neck. "You were a brilliant engineer, Nias. In honor of your excellent work in completing the Avid, I will end your life quickly. You can repent for your insolence in the afterlife."
Faced with Marie's deadly serious intent, Nias begged me for help. "Gyaaa! Lord Liaaam! S-save meee!"
I admit I was amused by Nias's terrified screaming. Marie, however, was completely composed. She truly intended to execute Nias on the spot.
Marie continued. "Nias, step away from the Avid. You'll dirty Lord Liam's personal craft with your blood. You don't want that either, do you?"
"I don't! But is there no other option than killing me?"
"There is not."
In my head, I gave Marie a perfect score for her "I'll kill anyone who makes a fool of you!" attitude as my retainer. Satisfied by her demonstration of loyalty, I figured I could let Nias off the hook at this point.
"Stand down, Marie."
Marie lowered her weapons and the blades retracted into their grips. She backed off, her eyes remaining cold.
"Nias, in return for your good work modifying the Avid I'll pretend I didn't hear that. So, as I said, all I ask is that you coat those silver parts again, but in gold this time."
"But I don't want to!" Even with my show of magnanimity, Nias resisted, tears in her eyes. I was trying to come to a compromise, but she still didn't want to do it.

“Are you disobeying my orders, you cretin?”
I couldn’t believe that even now she had the audacity to refuse me so quickly. Marie started to draw her swords again, but I figured I’d at least listen to Nias’s reason for her refusal.
She cried, “The silver parts aren’t silver, but mithril! They’re all mithril! *Mithril!* Mithril is much stronger than gold, and far more valuable, and it shines so beautifully, doesn’t it? Do you know how much work it took to process it? And you want to put gold plate over it? You’re horrible!”
So they aren’t silver, but mithril… I understood the value and attributes of mithril in this world, but I still liked gold better.
“I still like gold better! How about making everything *but* the silver parts gold, then? Let’s make it as tacky as we possibly can, why don’t we?”
“Your taste sucks! I can’t believe you don’t understand how great the shine of black armor is! The black parts are adamantite, which is also more valuable than gold!”
All the decorations adorning the Avid were in silver, like my family crest, and I had to admit silver on black *was* rather elegant. Still, all I asked was to change the silver parts to gold, but Nias was resisting me as if her life depended on it.
I snapped, “How dare you defy me? If you were anyone else, I’d have you beheaded right here, you know that?”
Nias’s personality may have left *much* to be desired, but her skills made her very valuable to me. At this time, she was the only person I trusted the Avid’s maintenance to. She was capable of repairing it, modifying it, or doing whatever my mobile knight required. It felt extremely unfortunate at that moment, but she was too important an asset to do away with. Knowing this emboldened Nias to treat me very differently than she would other nobles.
“It doesn’t need any alterations. This beautiful black you see is the shine of adamantite. It’s prettier than most gemstones! Ahh, to think the Avid could be dirtied by tacky gold plating…”
As Nias clung to the Avid protectively, crying her pathetic crocodile tears, Marie approached me.

“Shall I torture her, Lord Liam?”
As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t say yes. Besides being too valuable, I *did* kind of like her, too. Since Eulisia of the Third Weapons Factory wasn’t around anymore, Nias served as my amusing “waste of a pretty face” girl.
“Nah, I happen to like girls with certain flaws, so I’ll let her off the hook today. As punishment for defying me, however, I’ll have you personally handle the changeover to gold, Nias.”
She responded by wailing that she still didn’t want to.
“Waaah! Lord Liam, you idiooot!”
In the end, after Nias practically threw a tantrum in front of the Avid, I eventually gave in and decided not to make any changes to the craft’s color scheme. But I did go and complain to the management instead. I’ll let her get scolded by her boss.

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Meanwhile, while Liam was away from school, Rosetta received a summons from the Observers, the group that monitored House Claudia.
Agents of this group had come to the campus and surrounded Rosetta in a reception room. As a lone girl surrounded by men, she felt psychologically pressured even before they spoke. When she heard why they had called her there, she was shocked.
“You want me to participate in the tournament?”
The Observers had just suggested that Rosetta, who now looked rather haggard compared to when she’d started at school, participate in the mobile knight tournament. In truth, their “suggestion” was more of a demand.
One of the Observers explained, “You only go to primary school once. You should forge some real memories while you’re here.”
Another said, “The proud daughter of House Claudia wouldn’t back off from a challenge, would she?”
“You can take out a loan in order to rent a mobile knight. We’ll introduce you to someone who’ll lend you the cash.”
Rosetta couldn’t begin to imagine herself competing against any of the other students. She was sure to lose, and what a pathetic loss it would be. Plus, the person she would be borrowing the substantial rental fee from was no doubt a loan shark, since no legitimate lender would have anything to do with House Claudia.
Rosetta knew she was not in a position to decline their “suggestion.”
“I understand.”
If she were to decline, she would only be restrained by the Observers for a long period of “persuasion,” and on top of everything else she had endured, she was too beaten to face that right now.
Situations like this had occurred many times in the past. If she attempted to decline their impossible requests, they would “persuade” for as long as it took for her to accept. Sometimes, she would be forced to go days without

sleeping or eating. Of course, the Observers would take shifts persuading her so it wasn't hard on them, but for Rosetta, it was torture.
"I would expect nothing less from the future duchess! Lord Derrick of House Berkeley and Pirate Hunter Liam are also participating in this year's tournament, so these matches are sure to be most entertaining."
The Observer had referred to Derrick as "Lord Derrick," but hadn't shown the same respect to Liam. To Rosetta, this made their alliances absolutely clear. The Observers were malicious officials on good terms with the Pirate Nobles.
I'm sure they just want to see me get injured in the tournament, so they can laugh at me.
They were called "matches," but the tournament consisted of serious battles between mobile knights that were extremely dangerous. It wasn't uncommon for people to be killed in these competitions. The Observers no doubt expected that Rosetta would have to participate in an old model of mobile knight, to make things as pitiful as possible. Their aim was to make her a laughingstock before the whole crowd, but Rosetta didn't have the will to resist them anymore.
Maybe it can all just end for me during the match. It might be better that way.
"Oh, and one more thing," one of the Observers began, tormenting her further. "You shouldn't go entertaining any bizarre fantasies. It appears Count Banfield is considering marriage with you, but I'm sure when he finds out about the immense debt your family is shouldering, he'll run. Oh, I know… Why don't you just take Liam's seed to continue your line of daughters? I think you should prostrate yourself before the count that you hate so much and beg him for his genes. Don't worry, we'll handle the negotiations for that with his family."
The Observers pushed this idea because they knew that Rosetta didn't like Liam, and that the scenario they suggested would be deeply humiliating for her. This arrangement would also ensure that House Claudia remained trapped in its situation for yet another generation.
"Do as you like," she said quietly.
Rosetta no longer had the will to oppose them in any way.

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After it was made official with Rosetta that she would participate in the mobile knight tournament, she was dismissed from the reception room. The Observers remained to discuss their plans for the future.
"He's just some country bumpkin count, but he causes problems when he acts on that high and mighty sense of justice of his."
The subject of the Observers' conversation had turned to the man who had proposed marriage to Rosetta. If Liam's marriage bid was successful, House Claudia would cease to be, and their organization would go with it. In a

broad sense, they were officials of the Empire, but they had no desire to find a new Imperial office to work for. Tormenting people was what they loved, what they were comfortable with, and what other office could provide them with that?
Thus, the men schemed to crush Liam.
“Did you talk to Lord Derrick?”
“Yes. He’s on board. The incident with Liam really got him thirsting for revenge. I don’t see the two of them burying the hatchet anytime soon.”
The Observers’ faces contorted in ugly grins.
“Let’s see that the overconfident House Banfield gets its comeuppance.”

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Liam wasn’t the only one making preparations for the tournament.
Not far from the planet that housed the primary school, a large number of pirate ships had assembled in space. They had come at Derrick’s summons, but he was left frowning at what he considered a poor turnout.
“This is it?”
Though Derrick’s anger was fearsome, the pirates feared Liam more.
One of the pirates who had shown up asked him, “A-are you really taking on Pirate Hunter Liam, Lord Derrick?”
Another chimed in. “I don’t care what the reward is, I’m not fighting Liam.”
“You think we’ll be able to do anything against him when big-name pirates didn’t stand a chance?”
Having had his fill of weak-willed complaints, Derrick snapped his fingers.
At his signal, the lights in his ship’s hangar came on, revealing an array of brand-new mobile knights.
A buzz went through the congregated pirates. Standing under the bright lights in front of the mobile knights was an agreeable-looking young man in a business suit.
“Hello. My name isn’t important, as I’m just a humble salesman from the First Weapons Factory. What *is* important, however, is that I hope you’ll enjoy these products from our factory.”
The pirates all looked to Derrick for further explanation.
Derrick said, “I’ve purchased some new cutting-edge models from the First Weapons Factory. These are a gift for you. If you can take out Liam, then they’re yours to do with as you like.”
He went on to lay out his plan in detail.
“I’ll be participating in the tournament at the primary school, but I can only bring one craft in with me. On the day of the fight, you people will enter the venue from the atmosphere and attack Liam. Don’t worry about anyone getting in your way. It seems we’ll be getting further assistance from the Observers of House Claudia too.”
“Are you sure we can trust them?” one of the pirates asked with suspicion.

“You can. They’re a nasty bunch who’ve been observing and tormenting a single family for two thousand years. Harassment is their specialty.”
Dead set against allowing Liam’s marriage to Rosetta, the Observers had approached Derrick to join forces with him in order to prevent it from happening.
“I won’t have another chance after this,” Derrick said to the pirates, clearly anxious. “I lost *that*, after all. If I don’t kill Liam in the tournament, I’ll lose my place in the Family.”
He couldn’t even go to retrieve *that* from House Banfield’s domain, since there was no way Liam’s military would allow him to search for it.
“If Liam’s taken out of the picture, I’ll be able to go back to…”
Derrick’s life at primary school had changed radically because of Liam. He was too afraid of Liam to leave the grounds of the Second Campus. That went for his lackeys as well. They could no longer throw their weight around on other campuses, for if Liam ever found them, they’d be lucky to escape unpunished. Their reign of terror was a thing of the past. That made Derrick feel pathetic; his pride was in tatters.
“Kill Liam, no matter what it takes. There’ll be no need to be afraid of him if you just surround him with state-of-the-art machines and beat the crap out of him, right? He may be the Pirate Hunter, but he’s just one guy.”
Derrick knew Liam was strong, but he was sure his gang would have the advantage of numbers.
Derrick chewed at his thumb nail. That’s right…it’ll be fine. On the outside, they have the look of pirate crafts, but they’re expensive new models on the inside! I’ll bury Liam with these things! He might have a solid old personal craft, but I’ve bought hundreds of state-of-the-art mobile knights! There’s no way we’ll lose.

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In a bathroom on the primary school’s First Campus, Kurt and Wallace were having a conversation.
“Me? I’m not entering this year,” Kurt said.
They were discussing the impending tournament. Whenever tournament time approached, male students naturally tended to talk about it more.
Wallace had assumed that Kurt would be participating. “You have a full mastery in your sword school, don’t you? If your family’s a barony, you must have a personal craft, right?”
Kurt was the heir to a barony, but he still had no intention of participating in the tournament.
“No, poor nobles don’t tend to have personal craft. Even if I did, I couldn’t beat Liam, and I’d never beat him in a thousand years in a rental craft.”
“Things must be pretty rough for you, too.” Knowing that Kurt was poor for a noble, Wallace could sympathize.

Kurt smiled awkwardly. “Things have gotten a lot better, though. We’re receiving a lot of assistance from Liam.”
The Exner Barony’s financial situation had improved thanks to House Banfield’s aid. Even so, they were still a struggling barony on the outskirts of the Empire. A luxury like owning a personal mobile knight was something House Exner still couldn’t quite manage.
“Do you think Liam could be convinced to sit this one out?” Wallace continued to worry about the tournament. “If Derrick from House Berkeley is going to make some kind of move, it’ll be during the tournament. Liam really shouldn’t fight against him.”
Kurt shook his head. He knew that he wasn’t likely to convince Liam of anything, no matter how hard he tried. “I don’t think I could stop him. He might even be really serious about this. You could say his battle with Derrick is already underway, even before they get in the ring.”
“He’s up against a pirate noble, you know! They’ve got a lot of allies, even outside the Family! Have you tried to tell him these aren’t the sort of people you mess with?”
The Berkeley Family had a lot of pull, not only with pirates, and had many friends among the more unsavory nobles too. When he’d heard this, Kurt had in fact discussed the matter several times with Liam out of concern.
“I did. I explained to him how dangerous House Berkeley is, but I think that just made Liam feel all the more motivated.”
“Why is my patron’s personality so extreme?” Wallace fretted, sounding desperate. “He’s so good to me though. I can’t just walk away. Still, he’s too damn righteous! Dammit! Why does my life have to be so difficult?”
Wallace cursed his fate for being one of too many princes, and for having a patron who was stubbornly determined to go up against a great evil. He complained for a while more about how things were difficult before, but nothing had really changed.

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Meanwhile, outside the boys’ bathroom…
Eila was anguished, knowing that Kurt and Wallace had entered the bathroom together.
Damn! That rotten, slimy little Wallace picked a time when Liam wasn’t around to sink his tendrils into Kurt! I can’t let him get away with this!
Eila had…personal reasons for disliking Wallace, and it wasn’t about him having tried to pick her up. She didn’t care about that at all.
How dare you worm your way between such a perfect pairing as LiaKur?! I can’t fantasize at all now because of you! All I picture is you stealing one of them from the other, and I’m sick of it!
Her mood was completely soured by Wallace’s intrusion into the relationship between the two good friends. With him around to disrupt

things, she couldn’t indulge in her fantasies of romantic feelings between Liam and Kurt.
What do I do? What do I do?! If I don’t get involved, will Wallace ruin Kurt? He can’t do that! I won’t accept him stealing Kurt from Liam! It’s bad enough there are already heretics who use terms like Liallace and Kurllace. If the one true pairing of LiaKur crumbles, then I…I won’t be able to live!
Passing students weren’t sure what to make of the sight of Eila dramatically holding her head in anguish in front of the boys’ bathroom.
“What is she doing?”
“Isn’t she waiting for Kurt and Wallace?”
“Is she lonely because Liam isn’t around?”
Eila didn’t seem to care about the tepid looks the other students gave her as they walked by.
What am I supposed to do?
A battle to defend Liam and Kurt from Wallace’s evil clutches was unfolding, but only inside the girl’s mind.

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Rosetta’s mother and grandmother, the current and previous heads of House Claudia, had been invited to Liam’s mansion on House Banfield’s home planet. Having no servants, the two of them arrived alone at his mansion.
A group of House Banfield knights and servants, headed by Brian the butler, were assembled to greet them. The knights were in formal dress. House Banfield’s sincerity was on full display, but the head and former head of House Claudia wore dark expressions on their faces.
“Welcome… We have been waiting for you,” Brian said with a smile. “But, umm… You two were the only ones we invited…”
Brian’s smile disappeared and was replaced by a look of confusion directed at the Observers waiting behind the two women. The group had walked up behind the pair as though it were completely natural.
“We are merely acting as House Claudia’s escorts. Pay us no mind,” one of the Observers brazenly said, looking not at all genial.
“I see. Please come this way, then.”
Brian invited the two women toward a reception room, and the Observers made a move to follow.
Seeing this, head servant Serena stepped close to Brian. “I’ll entertain these officials, Brian.”
“Thank you, I’d appreciate you handling them. Is that all right, though?”
“It’s no problem. We need to get those nuisances away from the meeting, somehow.”
Brian was hesitant to accept Serena’s offer at first, but he ultimately acquiesced as it would be more convenient for him in the long run.

“I was hoping to have a woman like yourself with me when I discuss things with the duchess and former duchess, but I suppose it is better that you deal with these interlopers instead.”
Brian intended to see that this marriage negotiation succeeded if it was the last thing he did.

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In the reception room, the duchess rushed to support the older woman when it appeared that her mother, former duchess, was about to faint.
Brian ran over to the woman to assess her condition. “This isn’t good. I’ll call a doctor right away.”
The former duchess just shook her head. It seemed her health had been failing her for some time now. “It’s too late for that. I am here because I wish to use what little time I have left for my granddaughter’s sake.”
The former duchess had grown considerably weak, especially since she had led a difficult life in a harsh environment for as long as she had.
The former duchess respectfully bowed her weary head. “Mr. Brian, please allow us to decline this marriage proposal.”
“M-may I ask why? Are you dissatisfied with Master Liam? Is it House Banfield that’s the problem? I assure you, Master Liam is serious about this. Could I ask you to think it over a little while longer?”
Was the problem the family, or the individual? The former duchess explained House Claudia’s position in response.
“We deeply appreciate House Banfield’s kind treatment of House Claudia. However, this union will only saddle House Banfield with immense debt, and you must have realized what a burden this marriage would be when you saw our…‘escorts.’ They only exist to torment House Claudia.”
“What…?” When the former duchess went into greater detail about the Observers of House Claudia, Brian’s face flushed with anger. “That is abhorrent. How could such a barbaric practice have continued until these times?”
Brian’s unfiltered criticism of an Imperial decree might have seemed treasonous, but such was the magnitude of his anger.
“If nothing else, we would at least be grateful to receive Lord Liam’s genes, so as to continue House Claudia’s lineage,” the current head of the family said. “Could you arrange that for us?”
Brian may have been House Banfield’s butler, and therefore a personal assistant to Liam, but it was outrageous that a duchess was reduced to asking such a request of him, even going so far as to straighten her posture when she addressed him. Her manner made it evident that her title of duchess was an empty honor. “All we ask is that you provide us with the means to continue House Claudia’s lineage.”
Having learned more about House Claudia’s circumstances straight from the mouth of its duchess, Brian made up his mind. I understand now,

Master Liam. You wanted to save these people. You've always been so kind. You have no idea how proud I am of you. I'm ashamed of myself for telling you there was no benefit in this arrangement.

Brian wiped his tears away with his handkerchief and looked the two women in the eye. "I'm afraid we cannot do that."

The expressions of the current and former duchess looked disappointed, but also resigned, as if they had expected this.

"Master Liam's desire is to take Lady Rosetta as his wife," Brian implored them once again. "I do not intend to back down on this matter! I beg you to reconsider our offer."

The women seemed to appreciate Brian's feelings on the matter, but the strength of his emotions only made them even more reluctant to involve House Banfield in their problems.

The former duchess shook her head. "We cannot. The union would only cause difficulties for House Banfield. You wouldn't be able to persuade the Observers, anyway. Their role has the weight of two thousand years of history behind it."

The Observers had done as they pleased for all this time, hiding behind the shield of the late emperor's orders. When something has gone on for that long, anyone was bound to think nothing could be done to change it.

Nevertheless, Brian persisted in his negotiations. "Master Liam is not the type to capitulate to something like that. Besides, the Empire has given its blessing to this marriage. House Banfield is willing to shoulder the dukedom's massive debt. Knowing all of this, is House Claudia still not satisfied with this union?"

The spirits of the two women had already been broken, so Brian's words couldn't get through to them. There was no hope left in their hearts, and they could only imagine another betrayal.

Still, for Liam's sake, Brian desperately continued his attempts.

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Serena had rather insistently guided the Observers into another room of Liam's mansion, under the pretext of entertaining them. There, she faced them head-on. "We have obtained the Empire's approval for this marriage. What possible issue could you have with it?"

The Observers, an arrogant bunch who sat with their feet up on the table before them, didn't seem to care about that.

"That changes nothing. We act under the direct orders of His Imperial Majesty. We take pride in what we do. Even if the marriage did occur, and our longstanding observation of House Claudia were altered, we'd simply observe House Banfield instead."

In other words, they were threatening to make House Banfield their new target.

"Do you mean to antagonize House Banfield?"

The Observers laughed when they heard it put this way.
“In the first place, this marriage is impossible. Lord Liam has gone too far in pursuing it. The Empire’s not so trivial an entity that one brat can cause radical change on a whim. The Empire’s great shadows are bound to swallow him up for even attempting such, and we are just a part of that abyss.”
Serena narrowed her eyes when the Observers boasted to her so menacingly. “Do you really think you can threaten Lord Liam and get away with it?”
“He’s just some kid, perhaps one that’s a bit stronger than most. Sorry, but that’s not enough to intimidate us. You’ll need some scarier words than that if you mean to threaten us, lady.”
Faced with the attitude of the Observers, Serena felt sympathy for the prime minister for having to tolerate them.
No wonder the prime minister is so vexed by them. Their vanity really is something if they think they’re the shadows of the Empire.
As she thought this, something stirred in Serena’s shadow. It was a pair of red eyes, watching these Observers who so blatantly mocked Liam in his own mansion.

Chapter 6:
The Mobile Knight Tournament

WE WERE APPROACHING the end of our third year of primary school. It was the season of the mobile knight tournament.

The tournament was a popular event in the Empire, and the mass media was here to cover it. Flocks of rich people had come to cheer on the youths who would be shouldering the future. Hah, just kidding; it was only entertainment to them. It was a cross between a kids' talent show and blood sport.

As a participant, I was standing by in the hangar with the Avid (modified for on-land use) looming beside me. If I were to give a name to its current state, it would be something like: Avid Mk II: Heavy Ground Type, perhaps? A new feature it had was that cables tipped with claws could be extended from the bottom of the shields attached to both its forearms. These weapons were capable of grabbing enemies and dragging them to me, or just crushing them from a distance. Both claw hands even had a pile bunker built into them: a penetrating spike that could be launched and then retracted. How enticing.

Another set of modifications of the Ground Type Avid were to its legs. They'd had hover units installed, which gave them a much thicker look. Then, there was the third arm installed on its back.

The hangar was packed with equipment for the tournament, and maintenance workers rushed about, exchanging parts and performing last-minute inspections.

Next to the Avid was a huge sword fashioned from rare metals. Its blade was a long, thin rectangle, with a squared-off tip. The grip could telescope to extend the sword's reach, and the total length of the weapon was longer than the Avid was tall. It was basically a brutal-looking slab of metal, but it was exactly the sort of weapon that really appealed to the male spirit.

"The Avid is spectacular in a whole other way when outfitted for ground use."

Marie stood next to me, holding my helmet in both hands. It was like having a skilled knight carry my luggage for me, but she didn't seem at all put off by the menial task. Instead, she seemed to enjoy it.

"I'm trembling with excitement at the opportunity to see you fight in the Avid up close, Lord Liam."

"That's nice."

"Yes! I'm truly blessed!"

It was cute how she blushed and flattered me like she really was happy about it, but this wasn't the treatment I was after right now.

Right then, a woman walked past the two of us. I was surprised to realize it was Rosetta, having changed into a pilot suit. She had chosen one that

really showed off her figure. She must have been confident in her curves. As a result, the eyes of all the men around us were glued to her. I'd thought she was a little more reserved than that, but I guess she had a bit of a vain streak. A pilot suit shouldn't really expose that much of one's body, so I couldn't help but find the outfit rather inappropriate.
Despite her revealing attire and the hungry admiration of onlookers, Rosetta wore a cold look on her face. Her expression said that she had no interest in the opinions of the masses. She was about to walk right past me without acknowledging me, so I called out to halt her.
"Hey, Rosetta. What's this—you're participating too?"
"I am," she responded curtly when she stopped, giving me a chilly look. She probably held me in contempt because she knew about Brian's persistent marriage negotiations with House Claudia.
"Don't be so cold to your fiancé. Can't you be a little more friendly, Rosie?" Our engagement wasn't official yet, but I sidled up to Rosetta in an overly familiar manner, anyway. *I bet I look like one of those super scummy guys you see in stories right now.*
"Not interested." She just brushed off my advances and continued on her way.
She really was strong-willed—which just meant it would be all the more rewarding to subdue her.
Man, Marie's really being docile today. While Rosetta had treated me disrespectfully, Marie just stood there and watched. I was worried she'd draw her swords like she had with Nias, but I guess even she knew there was a time and place for such displays.
"She's so cute. Don't you think so, Marie?"
As I relished Rosetta's chilly attitude, Marie agreed with me, despite our difference in gender. "It's exactly as you say, Lord Liam."
She's just a yes-man who agrees with everything I say—or a yes-woman, I guess. That's just the kind of person she is. I do want obedient people like her to pledge themselves to me, but right now I'm more in the mood to pursue someone unwilling like Rosetta.
I'd taken on an attitude that women tended not to like, so I wanted her to say something like, "I can't approve of your attitude just now, sir!" I wouldn't want to hear that from Amagi though. It took me time to recover when she derided me. I imagined Amagi looking at me with scorn and decided to get just a bit more serious.
I should check on who I'm up against in the tournament...
"Who's my opponent in the first match?" I asked Marie. I really should have checked this on my own earlier, but I was an important guy, and all menial tasks could be left to the people under me.
Marie checked on her tablet right away, but when she saw the name of my opponent, she lowered her tone. "It's Lady Rosetta."
She'd muttered the name with a meek look on her face, but when I heard it, I grinned.

“How lucky can I get? Don’t you think so, Marie? I’m up against Rosetta right off the bat. Maybe this is fate.”
In my very first battle, I’d be able to beat down a haughty, arrogant woman.
Don’t break too easily now, Rosetta.
“Yes, sir. You are truly loved by Lady Luck.”
At Marie’s serious answer to my joke, I looked at her and thought, *Yeah, I’m just not satisfied with this.*

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The tournament’s spectators watched the matches in a coliseum-like venue, but the mobile knight battles actually took place elsewhere. It was much too dangerous to observe battles between mobile knights up close, so the true arena was far removed from the spectators. What they would be watching were holographic transmissions of the battles.
This mobile knight tournament had a dual purpose. To the nobles in attendance, it was both entertainment and an important litmus test. Through the matches, they could judge which families’ heirs would grow up strong, and who had been raising their children poorly. This competition was an opportunity for them to determine these things with their own eyes.
In that sense, Derrick had already shamed himself in front of a great number of nobles. Twice now, he had bribed and threatened his way to victory, despite having no real skill himself. Derrick was quite pleased with his victories, but behind the scenes, he was scorned as a good-for-nothing. The spectating nobles were sure that as long as Derrick was participating, there wouldn’t be any decent matches.
Derrick was fighting in a mobile knight right now, in fact, and it was hard to watch. His opponent was clearly going easy on him.
“What an awful match,” Kurt said, as he watched from the spectator seats, a disgusted look on his face.
Kurt and Wallace sat with Eila between them up in the stands. The students around them cheered at the enormous, impressive 3D images of the competing mobile knights.
“Yesss! I’m gonna win big today, just you wait!”
Wallace was part of the cheering crowd, and he’d bet on Derrick in this match, since he figured that as long as nothing went wrong, Derrick was sure to win.
Eila watched Wallace with revulsion plain on her face. “I can’t believe you’d bet on Derrick with Liam’s money. You’re scum.”
“Sorry, Eila, but I want to win, too. Nobody’s showing any motivation except for Derrick, anyway.”
It was just as Wallace had said. In matches that didn’t involve Derrick, it was a true clash of skill, but when it was Derrick’s turn to fight, his opponents always became cowed and held back against him.

Despite this, Kurt had realized that Derrick's mobile knight wasn't just for show. "He's got an expensive personal craft there. Looks like cutting-edge tech. I don't know about his skills, but his machine's specs are far above anyone else's. His opponents might not be able to beat him even if they tried properly."

The mobile knight that Derrick piloted looked so new that Kurt suspected even the regular army might not even have that model yet, but then again, it had been decorated so gaudily that one couldn't imagine what it had originally looked like.

Eila shrugged disparagingly. "Is he so weak that he got a cutting-edge machine to compensate for his lack of ability, but he *still* has to buy off his opponents anyway?"

Wallace shuddered at Eila's blunt words. "You sure are fearless. You're gonna be in trouble if the wrong person hears you talking like that. I wonder where he got that thing, though. There are plenty of weapons factories… I hear the Third is pretty popular."

Seated just behind the chatting trio was a group of weapons factory personnel who'd come to observe the tournament. One of them leaned toward Wallace to answer his question.

"That machine's from the First Weapons Factory." It was Nias. "It's a crude work pieced together from tech stolen from other factories, which they think they can get away with just because their factory's on the Capital Planet."

When the three friends turned around in surprise, Nias waved at them and smiled. "Long time no see, you two."

Her criticism of Derrick's machine was harsh. "Well, it *is* a new model, but it's more focused on appearance than performance. I took a look at the data and its balance is crap. I would have thrown it out at the design stage. Their work ends up looking so ugly because they're just cobbling together the technology of other designers."

Her explanation made it clear just how displeased Nias was with the machine.

While Kurt and Eila struggled to come up with a response, Wallace stood up and brought his face close to Nias'. "Wait a second. Does Liam have a chance to win? I hear his machine is an older style."

Even if Derrick's piloting skills were subpar, a cutting-edge mobile knight was still a threat. Wallace had heard that Liam's Avid was an updated older model, but now Nias' criticism of Derrick's machine was making him nervous about the match.

Nias gave Wallace a smile, as though he had asked a stupid question. "The match is practically over already. The Avid can't possibly lose if Liam is serious."

Her expression quickly grew grave, however. Just past Wallace and friends she had spotted some engineers from the First Weapons Factory in the audience, who had developed Derrick's machine. Furthermore, she noticed

that all the other weapons factory workers seated nearby glared at the representatives of the First. It appeared that the First Weapons Factory had earned the ire of every other factory.
Nias added, “That’s if his opponent fights fair, of course.”
For the weapons factories, the tournament was a great advertisement for the crafts they engineered that would appear in the fights. Nias and the other workers from the Seventh Weapons Factory were hoping for a good show from Liam’s Avid, but the same went for the people from the First, who had provided Derrick’s new model.
Derrick won his match, of course, and the arena began broadcasting the next one. Seeing who was involved, Wallace looked toward the proceedings in pity.
“Poor thing. I feel sorry just looking at her.”
Liam was fighting in the next match, but he was up against Rosetta, who piloted a training craft rented from the primary school. Signs of numerous repairs stood out plainly on the rental, which made it look like it was just one step away from falling apart.
Nias noticed its sorry state immediately. “That machine’s gone far beyond its limits. It’s dangerous to even ride in something like that.”
Kurt said, “This is awful… Oh! There’s Liam!” He reacted to Liam’s appearance with a broad smile, and Eila smiled in turn at seeing this.
“You’re so excitable, Kurt.”
“S-sorry.”
Beside them, Wallace asked, “Are you sure you don’t like Liam a little *too* much, Kurt?”

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I descended into the arena in the Avid. I say “arena,” but it was really just a huge wasteland on one of the planets owned by the primary school. The whole area was in a state of ruin due to all the matches that had been held there.
In any case, the actual battle arena was very much removed from the spectator area. If I were to use my previous life as an example, it was as if the spectator seats were in Japan and the arena was in Australia or some other foreign country. It was way too far!
“The scale is far greater in an intergalactic empire,” I mused to myself.
The cockpit of the Avid was nice and roomy since it used spatial magic to expand the interior. And the luxurious seat was extremely comfortable too. I’d spent a pretty penny making this cockpit nice and cushy. In terms of the Avid’s controls in general, not much had been changed since the update, but the materials had been replaced with better ones. Some new features had been installed as well.

Satisfied with the performance of the reborn Avid, I directed my gaze at my opponent, watching Rosetta through the holographic monitor floating before me.
“It really must be fate that you’re my first opponent, don’t you think?”
Rosetta was right in front of me in an older style mobile knight that looked like it was moments away from breaking down. I heard the referee announcing the start of the match, but the words went in one ear and out the other. The only one I had eyes for was Rosetta.
My monitor displayed an image of my opponent, seated in the dirty, worn chair of her cramped cockpit. At first, she had her head down, but she looked up and glared at me. I could feel the hatred in her eyes directed toward me and it made me shudder.
I was piloting the incredibly powerful Avid, into which I’d poured an excessive amount of money and rare resources. There was an obvious, overwhelming difference in our craft’s appearances and capabilities that you could see just by looking at them. On top of that, my grades were so much higher than hers in school as well. Our personal abilities and the performance of our machines…well, there was a gap between them like they were heaven and earth. This match was over before it even started, but Rosetta hadn’t given up yet. I had to commend her for that.
Well, no matter how hard she might try to oppose me, today I was prepared to crush Rosetta’s noble, steely spirit. I was already fully prepared to break the unbreakable, after all.
Over my mic, I said to her, “Rosetta, I commend you for actually showing up to the fight and not just withdrawing. If you cry and beg me to go easy on you, I promise to defeat you gently.”
Rosetta responded to my cheap provocation exactly how I had hoped she would.
“…up!”
“What was that? I didn’t hear it. Could you say it one more time?”
That was a lie. I’d heard her just fine, but I wanted to hear it again.
“Shut up! I won’t lose to you! In an honest fight, even I have a chance of beating you!”
You truly are incorrigible, and so, so cute. I’m impressed by the strength of your spirit, to admit that you’d never normally be able to beat me, but in a real fight, you just might. It’s true that there’s a possibility you could win, as ridiculously unlikely as that is. There are no absolutes in this world, after all.
“Let me teach you a valuable lesson. Reality always smiles on the strong. If you admit your loss now and wag your tail for me, I’ll be sure to treat you nice.”
“Don’t mock me!”
The signal was given for the match to begin, and Rosetta’s mobile knight immediately charged toward me. Her piloting was terrible, and it almost made me laugh the way her ugly, wobbling craft looked rushing at my newly

strengthened Avid. To Rosetta, our pairing against each other must have seemed entirely unfair.
“You can’t beat me, but I acknowledge that unbreakable spirit of yours. Oh, and just so you know… I *am* going to make you mine!”

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Rosetta was well aware that she could not defeat the craft before her. The mobile knight Liam piloted was on a whole different level than her rental craft. Even so, what else was there to do but fight? She charged forward and swung her sword at him, and Liam’s Avid dodged with an agility she hadn’t expected from something of its size.
Liam wasn’t taking the match seriously. He didn’t even have the Avid equipped with a weapon yet. He wasn’t even attempting to draw the huge sword affixed to the craft’s back with an extra arm.
“Damn you! Damn you!” Rosetta slashed at the Avid in her decrepit craft, which had barely any pilot assist features functioning.
Her mobile knight trod clumsily across the ground. With each movement, the craft made ominous creaking and groaning sounds, and the cockpit shuddered. In contrast, each movement of the Avid was fluid and soundless. Though the craft was enormous, the ground didn’t even tremble under its hover-cushioned strides. The difference in performance between their two machines made it hard to believe they could both be called mobile knights.
“How much money does it even take to craft a machine like that?!”
Rosetta wanted to cry, but she resisted the urge with everything she had. She swung at Liam, trying to hit him at least one time, but the Avid easily caught her blade with one of its manipulators, as if to mock her. He had practically caught a live blade between his fingers. A mobile knight’s jointed hands were used to replicate delicate movements and could easily break if the pilot attempted something like that. The Avid’s hand didn’t break, however, and worse than that, Rosetta’s sword was shattered between its crushing digits.
“Wow, was your sword made of glass? Way too fragile.”
It was true that it had been a low-quality sword, but it shouldn’t have broken so easily. The Avid’s abilities were fearsome, but Liam’s piloting skills were even more incredible.
It was more apparent than ever that Rosetta had no chance of winning. The Avid had purposely allowed her to attack and then easily disarmed her, simply to toy with her.
Her opponent was making a complete fool of her, and Rosetta couldn’t stand it. “Go ahead and keep looking down on me! I’m not losing to you!”
Rosetta was jealous of Liam. He was practically the embodiment of everything a noble should be, and more than anything else, he was *strong* more than anything. She admired how he seemed to ooze confidence. She

was gripped by a fierce longing to be the way he was. That she couldn't be that way was so miserable to her…and she didn't want to admit it.
"Aaaaah!" She pressed forward, and since she'd lost her weapon, she went for a tackle. Unfortunately for her, she hadn't noticed that the Avid had drawn its sword at some point.
"Wh-what?" A second later, all the areas of the craft shown on her systems monitor flashed red. Before she even knew it, her mobile knight's arms and legs went flying.
Her craft collapsed to the ground and rolled over once so that it lay face-up. The cockpit quaked violently.
"Ugh!" Just as everything stopped moving, the Avid strode over and planted one foot on her mobile knight's torso. Most of her monitors were gone now, but on the ones that remained in her cockpit, all she could see was the Avid looming massively above her. The black craft radiated intimidation, and Rosetta was left frightened by the sight of it.
Reality had beaten her down with one enormous blow. *There's nothing I can do now. It's over.*
And just like that, Rosetta's spirit was crushed completely. She laughed and laughed, tears streaming down her face.
"Ah, ha ha ha!"

***

In the spectator seats, Kurt was watching the hologram of the Avid in shock. "What a performance! That thing is ridiculous."
Even if the surrounding students understood that the craft Liam was piloting was impressive, they couldn't truly understand just how impressive it was. The weapons factory workers in the crowd, however, had all sorts of different expressions on their faces. Some had watched the battle with eyes wide in fascination, while others had gone pale with incomprehension.
As for Nias, she cheered wildly behind Liam's friends. "Way to go, Avvy! You showed 'em all what you can do!"
To those like Kurt with some degree of skill as a mobile knight pilot, or people involved in the manufacture of these machines, Nias' painstaking modifications to the Avid made it a wonder to watch in action. The ground didn't sink or shake when the great machine took its steps, and its every motion was unnaturally quiet. It moved so smoothly that it was hard to imagine it was such a heavy mountain of metal.
Next to Kurt, Eila expressed her sympathy for Rosetta. "This is just too cruel. She never even had a chance." The difference in their skill levels was crystal clear.
For his part, Wallace looked relieved that Liam was stronger than he'd imagined him to be. "Well, it appears my patron really *is* powerful. Maybe I don't have to worry about him getting killed by Derrick, after all."

Kurt continued to stare at the Avid, transfixed, a hand to his mouth. “Its performance is on a whole different level than before. It’s not just because its materials were updated—its responses are all heightened too. How can he pilot a monster like that without any sort of assist functions?”
Just having an incredibly impressive machine didn’t necessarily make its operator capable. It was Liam’s flawless piloting skills that allowed the Avid to utilize its full potential. This craft would be nothing but a failed experiment, barely capable of taking a step, if the average pilot attempted to operate it.
“I can’t believe how he can make such a difficult craft move as if it’s his own body.”
While the other students around Kurt marveled at the mobile knight itself, Kurt was instead in awe of Liam’s personal prowess.

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The Avid bent down over the limbless the torso of the mobile knight that contained Rosetta and carefully pried open the cockpit with its fingertips. With the hatch open, Rosetta could see the outside scenery. Her long hair swayed in the wind. She climbed outside and found that Liam had also left his cockpit, and he stood smiling at her.
Should I prostrate myself before him and apologize? Maybe he’ll give me some money if I flatter him a little. My family’s debts are going to be all the worse now that I’ve wrecked this rental machine.
Her spirit broken, Rosetta considered throwing away her pride and clinging to Liam and begging for his help, but before she went through with it, she wiped her tears away.
No… I should just let House Claudia die out with my generation. I won’t make any daughter of mine endure the same fate. This is the only act of defiance I’m capable of.
She hardened her expression and glared at Liam as he smiled down at her. Because of their relative positioning, she had to look up at him.
It was Liam who spoke first. “Pretty pathetic, Rosetta.”
As she stared back at him, she put on her bravest face. “You’re just a savage, aren’t you? An honor student like you, tormenting girls for fun? Soon, everyone will find out who you really are.”
Liam wasn’t angered by Rosetta’s harsh words. In fact, he smiled. “What do you know about me? Have you resigned yourself to your fate yet? Just give up and become mine. If you do, I’ll save you.”
I’d like to see you try, Rosetta thought when she heard that. If he really could deliver her family from their long years of suffering under massive debt and social stigma of disobeying the emperor, then she would be all for it. In fact, if he truly meant it and wasn’t just playing, she thought she might very well fall for him. Rosetta found herself entertaining a spark of hope, that Liam would say all of that for her.

Who does he think he is, really? I never thought someone would say such words to me, and yet…

"I don't think so," Rosetta responded swiftly, and Liam's smile vanished. With everything he'd done to get to this point, if she rejected him here, it would likely tarnish his reputation. Even while she was sure that she was enraging him, Rosetta continued to put on a brave face.

"I may have lost the match, but my will is not yet lost! If you want to kill me, then kill me, but I will never bow my head to you! I am a Claudia—I am Rosetta Sereh Claudia!"

When she had signed up for the tournament, the danger had been explained to her. She had signed a waiver accepting that if she were to be killed, her death would be treated as an accident. On rare occasions, feuding houses took advantage of this policy to eliminate a rival. Thus, Liam held Rosetta's life in his hands right now. She recognized that this little act of defiance might be her last.

Mother, Grandmother, please forgive me. This is the only way. There is no other salvation for us. But…I wish I could at least have achieved some small measure of happiness in my lifetime.

She never aspired to have a lavish life… She just wanted to live modestly with a loving husband. The truth was that Rosetta would have actually preferred a life like that to achieving any high-ranking title. She understood, though, that this dream was forever out of reach.

Rosetta closed her eyes. If there's another life waiting for me after this one, I hope I can at least marry someone I love there. Oh, I wish I could have worn a wedding dress. I wanted to give Mother and Grandmother some peace of mind…to see them smile…

Rosetta recalled the treatment her family had suffered, and the harassment of the Observers. She accepted that everything she hoped to achieve had been impossible, and she waited for the final stroke of her fate. She now only wanted to be killed by Liam in a fit of rage, because if he didn't do so, then she might just have to close the curtains on her life herself.

As she stood there waiting, though, the end never came. Rosetta opened her eyes and looked up to find Liam smiling at her warmly.

"You're so strong."

"Huh?"

The smile on his face wasn't the nasty smirk he'd worn before, but a genuine, captivating grin. Rosetta had thought he would see through her through her brave face and sneer at her mockingly, but his expression was one of kindness.

"I admire your efforts thus far," he said, "but now it's over."

What was over? Rosetta found herself harboring some unidentifiable expectations for what Liam would do next.

No, I can't expect anything good from him. How many times have my expectations been betrayed? Liam couldn't possibly save my family, even if

he really wanted to. I know that if I dare to dream again, I'll only be setting myself up to fall harder when betrayal comes again.
Though logically she knew she shouldn't place her trust in Liam, deep in her heart, she couldn't help from hoping.

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Rosetta, you truly are incredible. I never thought I'd see a scene like this play out in real life. I'm so thankful.
In discussing the period dramas he was so enthusiastic about, my old coworker Nitta had described scenes of strong-willed heroines refusing to give in to their villainous tormentors. I was finally able to understand what he was talking about. *I get the appeal now, Nitta!*
I was greatly impressed by Rosetta's unbreakable will. Regardless of that, it was too late for her now.
Over my pilot's helmet, a call came through for me, relayed by the Avid. It was Brian.
"We've done it, Master Liam! I've managed to convince them! Your engagement with House Claudia is now official!"
"Well done, Brian. Perfect timing too."
This was all a result of my good karma, I supposed. Or was I reaping the evil rewards of my bad karma? Actually, maybe the Guide had gone behind the scenes and set things up for me. I really can't thank that guy enough. I'd like to pay him back for all he's done sometime, but I'm not entirely sure how to do that. Guess I'll just keep sending him my thankful feelings like I do every day.
First, though, I had to show Rosetta hell.
"Looks like I have some good news for you, Rosetta."
"Y-you do?"
I couldn't help smiling when I saw how tough she was trying to act.
"Our engagement was just made official. Your mother, the duchess herself, approved it. Congratulations…from this moment on, you're my fiancée."
"Wh-what?"
When I saw the look of disbelief on Rosetta's face I felt a true sense of satisfaction. On the inside, I did a fist pump. *It hurts when even the family you trust betrays you, doesn't it?!*
"On our fourth-year break, we'll go back to my domain together. I'm gonna have you take over for your mother and become duchess, and then I'll just marry you and take your title from you, as Duke! You and your peerage and *everything* there is to you is mine!"
Rosetta trembled with frustration. "Everything? Do you really mean that? Th-that's impossible. There's no way!"
"Oh, but there is! I'm taking all that is yours. You're happy to hear that, aren't you?"

“B-but… How could you do that? Why…?” Rosetta crouched down and held her head in dismay, unable to accept reality.
It’s time for her wakeup call.
“Don’t look away. This is your reality, and you can’t escape from it.”
“…?!”
She’s probably seething. I’ve already so much as stolen that noble title that’s so important to her, and made her my possession, too, removing her from the solace of her family. Hey, it was hard for me in my past life, too, you know, and I don’t just mean losing my family. The moment I found out I’d been betrayed was truly painful, so I understand your suffering well. That doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to trample all over you, though! I’m no longer the one who’s being taken from and taken from, until I have nothing left. Now, I do the taking.
To hammer home the point, I gave Rosetta a thorough explanation of just how trapped she was. “Even the Empire has officially approved of our marriage. Isn’t that great? No matter how you resist, both your family and the Empire itself have my back. There’s no home for you to go back to anymore. With House Claudia’s title transferred to me, your whole territory will be snatched up by the Empire.”
“Huh? But, why?” Rosetta could barely speak through her surprise, poor thing. Her family was essentially being ousted and she was losing her beloved homeland.
“Be happy, Rosetta,” I told her. “No one will get in the way of our union. Nothing and no one!”
The brave face had crumbled away, and tears began to pour down her face. As she wept, she muttered something, but I couldn’t hear what it was.

I felt great satisfaction for having broken Rosetta's spirit, but at the same time, I felt a touch of pain for some reason. Had the people who'd tormented me in my previous life looked upon me in this same way?
My heart hurt a little, but I told myself that was just because I was remembering my past.
Over my helmet's communication link, I got in touch with Marie. "Keep an eye on Rosetta for me. If anything concerning happens, you handle it."
Marie sounded as happy as a loyal hound to be trusted with this responsibility. *"Yes, sir! Leave everything to me!"*
I turned my back on the sobbing Rosetta and returned to the Avid's cockpit. "Now then, who am I up against next?"

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The one-sided match had come to an end.
As Rosetta cried, Wallace watched with mixed feelings. There was video but no audio, so the audience didn't know what was said between the two contestants.
"Liam's such a bastard to make Rosetta cry like this," he said to Kurt and Eila, but the two of them weren't even listening, being too excited.
"I can't believe how he keeps improving," Kurt said. "I'd like to think I've gotten stronger too, but he just keeps widening the gap between us. I've got to work harder."
Eila replied, "Well, Liam is your ideal, isn't he, Kurt? I know you two are friends, maybe rivals, too, but… Would you say your relationship is something…special?"
"Yeah, I guess so. I hope it can become special, anyway."
"It can! I know it can!"
"Y-you think so?"
Eila grinned when Kurt blushed at the notion of having a special relationship with Liam.
Watching them, Wallace thought to himself. These three sure are close. But am I the only one who feels like something weird is going on here?
He decided to ignore the commotion the two were making and focused on the next competition. "Well, I guess I can ask Liam what happened later. Who's gonna be in the next match again?"
As Wallace casually checked the schedule, Nias adjusted her glasses and stared hard at the holographic screen in the center of the spectators' coliseum, having noticed something odd. Just minutes ago, she had been raving in joy about the Avid's performance, but now her intense face looked like it belonged to someone else.
"What's that interference on the screen? Something's strange…"
The three-dimensional images projected there were getting fuzzier and fuzzier, but through the static, she could make out multiple craft approaching the Avid.

Expert that she was, Nias was able to identify these enemy mobile knights arriving on the scene. “Pirates? No, those are new crafts from the First Weapons Factory. They’ve just had their appearance changed a little.”
The crafts looked like pirate weapons, but Nias was able to recognize them as new machines.
When he heard Nias say this, Wallace deduced who was behind this turn of events. With his face having gone pale, he cried out, “Th-this isn’t good! Derrick plans on killing Liam, right there and now!”
Just then, the feed projected into the center of the coliseum cut out, and the screen displayed nothing more.
The spectators no longer had any way of knowing what was happening at the arena.

Chapter 7:
The Pirate Hunter and the Pirate Knights

AFTER LIAM AND ROSETTA'S MATCH ended, the hangar their mobile knights had been dispatched from was busy preparing to receive them back. People working for House Banfield scurried about in a frenzy.

"Lady Rosetta has arrived!"

A labor machine, much like a mobile knight with no weaponry, carried Rosetta's destroyed mobile knight into the hangar. Once it had been deposited inside, Marie, who was in charge here, issued orders to the rest of the House Banfield team.

"The young lady of House Claudia is officially Lord Liam's future wife. Do not forget that treating her carelessly is akin to bringing disgrace to Lord Liam himself."

A short while later, a small craft carrying Rosetta arrived inside the hangar. A long red carpet had been laid out in advance and knights, soldiers, and attendants stood in rows on either side of it. Their assembly had been hasty, so the gathered personnel murmured anxiously.

"Hey, shouldn't she see a medic first?"

"There's one waiting in the back."

"A-a change of clothes! Someone, prepare a change of clothes!"

"Settle down, you dolts!" Marie barked at the crowd. "I'll lop your heads off if you keep up with that noise."

The hangar quieted and the hatch of the small craft opened, stairs extending beneath it. A frail Rosetta appeared from inside, eyes red from crying, supported on both sides by female knights. In an honorable display of greeting, the knights lining both sides of the carpet drew their swords in unison and raised them high. The soldiers saluted, and the female attendants curtsied. As Liam's future wife, Rosetta was suddenly viewed by everyone there as someone very special.

For her part, Rosetta was rather bewildered to be greeted with the utmost courtesy.

Marie made her way to Rosetta and took a knee before her, bowing her head. "We, the retainers of House Banfield, are so very glad to receive you, Lady Rosetta."

Instead of the flustered Rosetta, in her mind, Marie saw her dear, long-dead friend. She felt deeply moved to welcome this girl, who shared blood with the friend whom she had failed to save from that malicious emperor.

I could never have imagined traveling through time to meet you like this. I'm so grateful that House Claudia managed to survive these last two thousand years. This time, I'll be here to protect you.

House Claudia had endured a different kind of torture than her own petrification, but to Marie, Rosetta was a comrade who had suffered the

same unfair judgment. She swore in her heart with the utmost conviction that she would protect this precious girl who was a descendant of the friend she couldn't protect two millennia ago.
Marie smiled at Rosetta warmly. "First, we'll have a doctor do a full physical examination, just to be on the safe side."
Lord Liam said their pairing in the tournament was lucky, and he was right. If she'd had to fight anyone other than him, she'd probably be injured right now, or worse.
Marie was relieved that, at a glance, she saw no obvious injuries on Rosetta. She knew that Liam had been careful not to hurt her, and she was thankful the girl had been delivered to her safely.
She wanted to escort her to the doctor right away, but Rosetta wasn't used to being treated like this, and was clearly disoriented by everything that was happening to her. Aware of that, Marie made an effort to reassure her. She smiled kindly at Rosetta. "There's no need to be afraid, my lady. Everyone here serves Lord Liam. You two, escort Lady Rosetta."
The two female knights who supported Rosetta directed her toward the back of the hangar. Some of the attendants went with them, and when the group was out of sight, the knights finally returned their swords to their scabbards.
With Rosetta out of earshot, the knights and soldiers began to whisper to each other again.
"What was that all about?"
"I thought for sure Marie would say, 'You're not good enough for Lord Liam!'"
"Guess I lose the bet."
These knights, familiar with Marie's usual fiery temper, were shocked by her demeanor toward Rosetta.
Overhearing their murmuring, Marie glared at the knights to shut them up. "Step forward if you'd like to be minced. I'll slice you up, inch by inch."
Just then, several soldiers bolted into the hangar.
"Lady Marie, it's an emergency!"
Marie frowned at the panicked state of the soldiers. She was irritated by the timing of it, but her gut told her this was some very bad news.
"What happened?"
"Lord Liam's been attacked by pirates!"

***

In the wastelands that made up the tournament arena, I suddenly found myself swarmed by pirates in mobile knights that had dropped down to the surface of the planet through the atmosphere. Unsurprisingly, among these descending mobile knights was Derrick.
I can't believe he'd just show himself to me in his prized personal craft like this. What an idiot.

“Liiiaaam! I’ve been wanting to see youuu!” Derrick yelled, no doubt trying to intimidate me.
He was really full of bravado today, considering how he’d been skulking around quietly ever since I’d slugged him that one time. I’d even paid a few visits to the Second Campus just to see if I might run into him, but every time I did, he must have been careful to stay out of my sight. It was easier for him to feel confident today with all those friends of his around him.
I replied, “You’re not going to run like you usually do? I figured you were so scared of me you’d probably scamper off today too.”
I aimed to provoke him, and true to his short temper, he immediately exploded with rage.
“It’s gutsy of you to act tough in a situation like this, I’ll give you that! Don’t think you’re gonna get an easy death here, Liam, and no help is coming for you! I’ve bought off the tournament security, but that’s not all… Those guys who keep watch over House Claudia don’t think too highly of you either!”
Being so excited, Derrick failed to provide any further details. Help from the primary school would be late, I guess. And House Claudia’s observers were now my enemy? Come to think of it, Brian said something about them too, didn’t he? They must have been working with Derrick now, because if House Claudia ceased to be, they’d be out of a job.
What idiots. A seriously bad move.
“Oh, yeah?” I replied. “Anyway, is this everyone?”
“Huh?”
The mobile knights surrounding me didn’t even number a hundred.
“I’m asking if this is all the people you brought. It so happens that my trusty Avid here was just upgraded, you see. I thought you guys would make for a good trial run, so to speak, but I’m not sure there are enough of you for that. Is this all a baron’s capable of?”
Further enraged by my remarks of being disappointed, Derrick quickly gave orders to the pirates. How shameful, a noble working with pirates. Well, they’re birds of a feather. Makes sense they’d get along.
“D-don’t you dare mock me! Kill him!”
At Derrick’s command, the pirates’ mobile knights bore down on me. From their movements, the machines appeared to be higher performing than the average mobile knight. They were thinly disguised as pirate crafts, but on the inside, I bet they were brand new models.
“These will make for a decent trial run, after all.”
I gripped the cockpit’s control rods and directed the third arm on the back of my craft to draw my weapon. I freed the great sword from its scabbard there with a loud, metallic scraping sound. The third arm brought the sword far enough forward that my right manipulator could take hold of it, and then the third arm released the sword and retracted.
One might think that such an enormous sword would place too great a burden on the machine’s joints, but when I took a mighty swing, it smashed all the enemies who had begun approaching me to pieces. It was a violent

movement, but the Avid's joints gave no complaint. This sword, too, was a massive hunk of rare metals fashioned by Nias' team, so the enemies didn't even leave a scratch on it.
"Isn't that something? The joints don't creak either, no matter how much I move!"
It seemed that no matter how hard I pushed it, the new Avid would be able to handle any move I wanted it to make. I was relieved to see that the improvements I requested were a total success.
"Guess I'll tell Nias she did a good job when I get back."
While I took a moment to consider paying the Seventh Weapons Factory a bonus, another wave of pirates who still didn't understand the difference in our machines' abilities came swarming at me.
"Whoa, come to think of it, this is my first ground battle."
The Avid's colossal body moved with fluid grace as I controlled it, lifting my sword up high before swinging it down violently. When it hit the ground, earth sprang up as if there'd been an explosion. The pirate craft I'd struck on the way down was flattened to the point of being unrecognizable.
I turned toward an enemy that had maneuvered around behind me and swung my blade sideways this time. The Avid easily bisected this mobile knight, which would probably be classified as a mid-sized unit.
I just kept swinging my sword around me, this way and that, and my enemies were destroyed one after another.
"Fragile. They're too fragile!"
The Avid was on a rampage, but rather than expending energy, it only seemed to become more energized, as if it hadn't had enough action for its tastes. Inside the cockpit, the chorus of activation noises sounded like the growl of a savage beast.
"That's it, Avid! Let's try this next!"
It felt as though I was only battling Derrick's goons to confirm the Avid's capabilities, not fighting for my life. It was more like the pirates were offering up their lives to me as fodder for my machine's workout. These pirates seemed stronger than the ones I usually fought against, but for the new and improved Avid, they just weren't worthy adversaries.
The Avid swung its monstrous sword about like it weighed next to nothing, and no matter how many shells or laser blasts its armor took, the attacks didn't leave a single mark on it. I just swung my sword to destroy my adversaries, crashing through their own swords and shields as if they weren't even there.
All around me, mobile knights were chopped into pieces, sent flying, and flattened. Even all the dirt and dust that was kicked up in blinding clouds didn't do a thing to hinder me.
"There!"
A master of the Way of the Flash would never lose track of an opponent, even while blinded. The Avid wasn't about to let enemies of this level get away either.

As I crushed the opponents around me one by one, naturally some of them finally wised up and tried to flee. There were more crafts showing their backs to me now, despite the way their own allies were still fighting.
“Hey now! You don’t think I’m gonna let you get away that easy, do you?”
I fired the cables contained within the Avid’s shoulder shields, and the claws at the ends of the cables grabbed the fleeing enemies by their backs.
As I approached the two craft I’d latched onto, over our communication link, I heard a pilot’s panic-stricken cries.
“N-no! I don’t want to die! P-please, spare me!”
“Pretty ballsy thing to say after you tried to kill me instead. No, I think each and every one of you is going to die here.”
One of the cables slowly coiled around the enemy’s torso, crushing it until eventually it sliced the craft in half. The other claw held tight to its captive, not letting go. I pulled a trigger on one of the control rods and the claw’s pile bunker shot into the craft, resulting in an eruption of flames. When the gunpowder detonated and propelled the spike forward, the enemy’s craft burst apart at the impact. With the claw now empty, it flew back to me, its cable winding back into its shoulder shield.
“These new weapons are great, too!”
As I laughed loudly, more enemies attempted to escape.
“Come on, I told you I wouldn’t let you get away, didn’t I?”
The Avid’s huge frame kicked off from the ground and grabbed the head of a fleeing craft. It had moved hundreds of meters in a single tremendous leap, blowing away all the enemies who lay in its path. Even a simple tackle from the Avid was a formidable attack to its enemies.
Holding the enemy’s head up with one hand, I dropped my great sword into the unit’s back and lifted the whole craft up.
“It’s no use fleeing. Now, let’s continue. You guys had better entertain me, like your lives depend on it!”
The pirates went quiet. Even Derrick, who had been so confident with the numbers he’d brought with him, was no longer blustering bravely.

***

Several hundred pirate ships looked down at the arena from space, watching on their monitors as the Avid mowed down their new, cutting-edge mobile knights.
“Is that thing a monster?” someone asked in awe.
“I-it’s a demon,” someone else muttered.
Liam, cheerfully bringing down their fellow pirates with his overwhelming strength, looked like a demon to them. At first, they had thought Liam was just bluffing when he acted so confident in the face of such overwhelming numbers, but now they were learning just how wrong they were.
All those brand-new mobile knights were turned to scrap, one after another. Others watched on the monitors as the Avid grabbed two crafts with the

claws attached to its shields and swung them around. Liam sent them crashing into their allies to destroy them, and then shot the Avid's pile bunkers into them to smash them to bits.
"How the hell were they supposed to win against something like that?"
The captain of the lead ship finally understood their disadvantage and shouted out the order for his men to flee. "R-retreat! If we stay here, we'll catch the eye of the Pirate Hunter!"
The captain had decided to abandon Derrick, but a guest on his bridge stopped him. It was one of the Observers who had joined forces with Derrick.
"You're going to run? That's not what we agreed on. The agreement was that you would kill Liam here!"
The Observer lunged at him and pointed at the monitor, but the captain shoved him away. On the screen, the Avid was still destroying the pirates' mobile knights.
"How the hell are we supposed to take that thing out?! W-we never wanted to fight Liam in the first place! If you guys want him dead so badly, assassinate him or something yourselves!"
"We only asked you because we already tried that!" The Observer was so panicked that he let slip that their assassination attempt had failed. "If we could kill him, we would've done it already!"
On the chaotic bridge, a voice that didn't belong to either of them came from an unseen source.
"You made an attempt on Master Liam's life, eh? Well, we can't have that, can we?"
A group of men dressed in black and wearing masks emerged from the pirates' own shadows. They swarmed up out of the floor and began slaughtering the bridge crew without a moment's hesitation. Their practiced movements marked them as professionals, but they also seemed to be enjoying themselves.
"Aaaaah!" Terrified, the captain pulled a gun from a hip holster and started firing. His laser pistol shot the masked men, but each streaking beam only lit their clothing red for an instant instead of doing any real damage.
The captain cried and screamed as Kukuri came at him. Grabbing the captain with a large hand, Kukuri slammed him against the floor.
"Such weaklings. You know, back in my day, pirates had a bit more backbone. Now then, I have some questions I need to ask you."
By this point, all of the Observers on the bridge had been bound by Kukuri's men. One of them cried out, "W-we're officials of the Empire, you know! If you harm us, you won't get away with it!"
Kukuri's men finished off the last of the bridge crew and crowded around the frightened Observers, watching them with smiles below their masks. Kukuri pinned the captain down with a foot on his chest and stroked his own chin with a massive hand as if deep in thought. He replied to the

Observer, “Well, we wouldn’t want any trouble, would we? But the thing is… We happen to *hate* dogs of the Empire, like you.”
One of Kukuri’s snickering subordinates thrust a knife into the thigh of the Observer who had spoken. He stabbed the man in a particularly painful place and then twisted the blade for good measure.
“Yooow!” the official howled in agony.
Kukuri grabbed this Observer by the head. “Whoops, that was a rude thing my subordinate did there, wasn’t it? It’s not easy having such hotheads working for me, but you understand how they feel, don’t you? After all, you like inflicting pain too, do you not? You’re the so-called darkness of the Empire, aren’t you? You must see this sort of thing every day.”
The Observer screamed with each twist of the knife, but no one could move to save him.
Kukuri looked up at the main monitor. “Ah, there they are. You people really are naive if you thought we wouldn’t anticipate your little pirate attack idea.”
The monitor revealed that a fleet from House Banfield had just arrived and had already begun taking out all the other pirate ships one by one.
“H-help me,” the injured Observer pleaded, crying.
“Oh, come now,” Kukuri responded, his tone oddly gentle. “You were calling yourselves the darkness of the Empire, so you shouldn’t be surprised that bad things can happen, right?” To his men he said, “Hey, boys, these people are still obeying the orders of that man who had us petrified. Why don’t you take your time showing them what *real* darkness is?”
“S-stop! Please, don’t!”
Kukuri’s men swarmed around the Observers. Their weapons glimmered ominously, and the Observers’ voices grew more frantic as they begged for mercy.
Meanwhile, Kukuri returned to the captain, who still lay on the floor.
“I-I’ll tell you anything! Please, spare me!”
“Oh, we’ve already got all the information we need, you see. If you want to do something for me, though, you can get on the communicator and order your men to board those new mobile knights of yours and fly them down to the planet. Lord Liam will take care of the rest.”
Once the pirate ship was under their control, Kukuri’s group had pirates board the new mobile knights and take them down to the planet. If the pirates fled or refused, they were killed. The only option they had was to fight Liam.
The captain gave his order, not letting on that he was a hostage, and the new pirate craft descended to the planet, where all that awaited them was the Avid. On the bridge monitor, they watched as Liam toyed with each new craft that engaged him. The pirates’ mobile knights were destroyed in succession, piling up in heaps on the ground. The rampaging Avid was so radically superior in its performance that it seemed like a different type of machine entirely from what the pirates operated. In fact, it looked less like

a machine and more like a kind of demon king one might read about in fairy tales.
“S-spare me!” the captain again pleaded, now that he’d obeyed Kukuri’s demands.
“What was that?”
“Please, I… I had no choice! This was all Derrick’s orders! I never wanted to pick a fight with Liam!”
Kukuri gave a throaty chuckle at the captain’s words. “Too bad you’re so obedient, then. And that’s *Lord* Liam to you. We can’t have pirates showing such disrespect, can we? Oh, but we don’t spare pirates, so, well… goodbye.”
With that, Kukuri stomped on the captain, crushing his head.

***

In a hangar near the arena, House Claudia’s Observers were becoming increasingly nervous, as they were unable to get in contact with their agents aboard the lead pirate vessel. They had come up with a plan to kill Liam, but it was being completely thwarted.
“Hey, what’s going on out there?!”
“Those pirates are so weak. They’ll never be able to take out Liam!”
“We should just find Rosetta and take her as a hostage!”
The Observers were starting to panic. After all, the overconfident Derrick had foolishly spilled their involvement. At this point, they were in just as much danger as the pirates. They knew that if Liam’s people found out they had helped conspire to kill him, the whole lot of them could be exterminated.
Suddenly, they heard the clacking of heels approaching them, and the Observers whirled in that direction. The source of the footsteps revealed itself to be a female knight with distinctive lilac hair.
“Wh-who are you?!” one of the Observers demanded, pointing a weapon at her for good measure, just in case she’d overheard their conversation. However, in the next moment, both the hand holding the gun and the man’s head went flying.
The Observer’s body hit the ground in a fountain of blood and the female knight stood over him, holding a sword in each hand. The swords were unique, their grips in the shape of pistols, and their blades a vibrating blur. Jagged teeth, seemingly made of pure light, spun around the outside of the blades like those of a chainsaw. She lowered one of these energized blades to touch the floor and a harsh metal scraping sound rang out, sparks flying from the contact. These swords looked far more sinister than typical blades, with their fearsome ability to tear through her enemies.
The corners of the female knight’s mouth curled into a sinister little smile as she stared at the Observers. “I was surprised to learn that fool emperor’s orders are still being carried out two thousand years later. I still remember

his laughing face as he watched us turn to stone. I truly regret not being able to grind that smug face of his to a pulp under my heel."
The Observers couldn't quite absorb what this knight was saying, but the one thing they understood clearly was that she meant to kill them.
Hoping to take action before she did, the men all rushed at the female knight at once.
"Get her!" one of them cried. "One woman alone can't—"
"And, that's two," said the knight.
The observer who made light of the female knight was the next to fall victim to her chainsaws. The female knight wasn't even doing anything special as she moved. She simply sidestepped a volley of laser beams fired at her and lunged forward.
The observers shot their ray guns at her, but she dodged and thrust out her chainsaws at them instead.
"Gyaaaaaaaaaa!" The Observer who'd begun to speak convulsed in agony, a chainsaw blade thrust deeply into his midsection, its vibration only heightening his pain. Disinterest was clear on the female knight's face.
The other observers turned pale at the treatment their ally was receiving.
"Come on, you can give me nicer screams than that, can't you? I've been waiting for two thousand years…just hoping a day like this would finally come!"
The female knight tore her sword free from the impaled Observer and leapt at her next target. Agile as a cat, she danced through another spray of lasers, slaughtering the Observers with her sinister weapons.
One of the men wailed, "W-we were granted a prestigious post, to carry out the late emperor's decree! Opposing us is the same as opposing the late emperor himself!"
In response, the female knight grinned. "That's *why* I'm killing you! I'll send you to the same place that bastard's rotting in right now! And when you get there, be sure to let him know that Marie has returned!"
The Observer who said those things about the late emperor was the next to meet his end, bisected vertically by Marie. Seeing their companion torn in half, some of the Observers tossed their weapons away and raised their hands in gestures of surrender.
"It's too late to drop your weapons now. I'm going to send every last one of you dogs to your master's side! You'll get to go see the emperor you swore your loyalty to. That's your greatest wish, isn't it?"
The Observers trembled. At this point, they finally realized that the woman before them was one of the Imperial knights who had been petrified two thousand years ago.
"She's Marie of the Three Knights!" one of them cried out in realization, a moment before Marie swept the head from his shoulders.
Seeing this, the remaining Observers attempted to flee, bolting for the hangar's exits, only to find that the rest of the knights who had been

petrified along with Marie were waiting in the doorways. The other knights joined the slaughter, until the last of the Observers was cut down.
Standing in a pool of blood, Marie spread her arms wide and laughed. “I’m so happy I get to serve Lord Liam. My two thousand years of agony all led me to this moment. This is fate!”

***

Enemies had stopped descending from the sky.
“Guess that’s it.”
The remnants of the mobile knights I’d destroyed lay all around me, and the only foe of mine still left alive was Derrick.
I said to him, “Well, you’re the only one left.”
“S-spare me! I’ll do anything! I’ll do anything you want!”
Derrick must have been rather forlorn now that he was by himself. It seemed that he had lost all of his former bravado.
“You’ll do anything?”
I thrust my sword into the ground, wondering just how Derrick was planning to amuse me when I detected something approaching at a fast speed.
Derrick’s mobile knight pointed at me, and he laughed over the communication link. “Dumbass! You thought I was just waiting here to be executed? While you were wreaking havoc, I was calling in some special contacts of mine!”
Derrick must have had some more mobile knights transported here. A number of mobile knights were rapidly dropping toward me, and I had the impression they were different from the enemies I’d fought thus far.
I hadn’t asked for anything, but Derrick began to explain them to me anyway.
“They’re pirate knights, Liam. And super infamous ones with huge bounties out for them. Speaking of bounties, you’ve got a bounty on your head among pirates too. When I told these guys I’d give them a nice bonus in addition to that, they came running to hunt you down.”
“People with reputations, eh?” I licked my lips in excitement.
Three craft appeared right in front of me, but my monitors confirmed one more at a further distance away. This one fired at the Avid from long range, but the laser was dispersed by my barrier before it could actually touch my machine. Meanwhile, the other three machines rushed the Avid with their weapons drawn.
I heard a voice boast, “I’ll be able to live in luxury for the rest of my life after I kill Pirate Hunter Liam!”
These pilots were much more skilled than the ones I’d just fought. As one of them leapt at me, using tricky maneuvers, I dislodged my sword from the ground and met his attack.

“That’s the only reason you’re challenging me? You should value your life over money.”
As I quickly cut down the first attacker, the other two tried to come in at me from both sides in a pincer attack. I held my great sword low and concentrated.
“Flash.”
The Avid couldn’t replicate my Way of the Flash technique completely, but its sword slash was still fast enough to smash both machines to bits.
I noted, “Still can’t perform the Flash with the great sword, huh?”
The quality of my special move was rather lacking due to gravity, the weapon, and a few other factors. *Hmm, maybe it’d work better with a katana?*
“Well, I guess this was good enough for a trial run.”
I’d put considerable strain on the Avid’s joints, but that hadn’t proved an issue in its current state. No complaints there.
I destroyed the three crafts attacking me and saw that the distant one was attempting to flee. I lined up the left hand of the Avid with the fleeing craft and a magic circle manifested in front of its palm. Other circles layered on top of that and entwined to form one complex circle.
“You thought I’d let you get away? You’re just one more prey for the Avid!”
I pulled a trigger on my control rod and a laser beam shot from the Avid’s hand mixed with the magic circle to form an arrow of light that rushed off into the distance. It pursued the fleeing pirate’s mobile knight and plunged into it, resulting in a huge explosion.
“The new output is incredible! Guess it was worth all that money I paid.”
As I stood there laughing in satisfaction, this time it was Derrick’s turn to attempt fleeing.
“Hey, where are you going?”
“S-stay away from meee!”
Derrick’s mobile knight drew a firearm and took a shot at the Avid, but it did no damage at all. I raised my great sword behind me and brought it down. Derrick blocked the strike with his own sword, which was covered in gaudy ornaments. The blades scraped against each other and sparks flew.
A holographic window appeared above my communications panel, and in it, I saw Derrick’s desperate face.
“P-please, let me go! I’ll do anything!”
Derrick clearly had no more backup plans, because he was pleading for his life in a truly comical way. At this point, did he seriously think I would let him go if he begged for his life? I couldn’t help toying with him, though.
“You’ll do anything, huh…” I repeated.
Derrick’s terrified expression eased up somewhat. He must have believed I was willing to negotiate.
“Just spare my life! I don’t want to die. I’ll never defy you again. I promise I won’t have anything at all to do with you! And I can get anything you want!”
“Don’t want to die, eh? And anything I want? Like?”

I gave him some hope and Derrick started to blabber on.
“Whatever you want! Money, women, anything! I-I know… What about elixirs? You could always use those, right? I’ve got tons of ’em!”
He’s got elixirs, does he? I thought he was just a lowly baron, but if what he said was true, there might be some worth to him.
“Well, I do want those.”
“I’ve got this special device… I can make as many as I want with it. If you let me go, I’ll get you all the elixirs you need.”
I felt great watching Derrick beg for his life, but to be honest, the deal he proposed didn’t sway me one bit. Elixirs? Sure, I did want them, but Derrick had tried to kill me, and that was something I couldn’t forgive. Anyway, the Guide always saw to it that I got anything I wanted. Just like the alchemy box and that mysterious sword, the things I needed always ended up in my hands somehow. There was no need for me to rely on a pathetic guy like this now. I had enough money to buy my elixirs anyway.
“Mmm, yeah, I think I’d rather you give me your life instead.”
“W-wait! That’s not what you said before!”
“Oh? I don’t remember making any promises.”
In my past life, I was deceived by my wife and debt collectors and went through hell. None of them had kept their promises, so now as an evil lord, it was my turn to say whatever I liked to get what I wanted.
I ramped up the power of the Avid and took hold of Derrick’s mobile knight, starting to crush it. His sword snapped, and the joints of his machine’s legs blew out from the weight bearing down on them.
“You’re seriously gonna kill me?!” Derrick wailed in his cockpit, his face a pathetic mess. “You made it sound like you were gonna spare me!”
“Yeah, well I was lying. I never had any reason to keep you alive. It’ll be a pain if your people use an elixir to bring you back to life, so I’ll have to be real thorough about killing you.”
“N-nooooo!”
“Hey, it’s your fault for picking a fight with me.”
I lifted up my great sword and pointed the tip of the blade at the cockpit, right where Derrick was seated.
I thrust the sword downward.

I lifted up Derrick's craft with the blade still stuck through it, and just then, communications with the primary school were restored. Talk about perfect timing. Had they been restored any sooner, the match probably would have been called off before I could kill Derrick. When I thought about it that way, I was seriously lucky.

With communications restored, staff from the primary school looked on in horror at the state of the arena.

"S-send a rescue unit right away!" one of the teachers cried.

They seemed to be pretty panicked. I didn't blame them.

"There's no point, sir. My opponent's already dead."

I had crushed the cockpit quite thoroughly. To demonstrate the fact, I smashed Derrick's craft against the ground with my sword.

Everyone accepted that if you entered the tournament, you risked death just by participating. This being the case, Derrick's death wasn't my responsibility. I didn't have anything to fear from some baron in the sticks if his family wanted revenge.

I stomped on Derrick's craft for good measure. "This was all you could manage, even with all those buddies of yours, huh? I guess small fry are still small fry, even if they band together."

I laughed, and the teachers looking on were speechless. Their shocked states were only natural, since the wreckage of hundreds of mobile knights lay around me.

The Avid had proved to me that it was much stronger than before, and I was more than satisfied. This had been a great test run, and I figured I could thank Derrick for that, at least.

***

"Why'd they pit those two against each other anyway?" someone in the spectator seats muttered.

It was an honest question. House Berkeley had gained notoriety as Pirate Nobles, and House Banfield had done the same as Pirate Hunters. It would have been obvious to anyone that if the two fought, something tragic would occur.

In the somber silence that followed the revelation that Derrick had perished, the spectators from the weapons factories desperately tried to hold back their laughter. Nias in particular looked like she was about to burst out in guffaws, but was doing everything she could to hold it in.

"I can't believe I didn't get to see the First Weapons Factory's new models get the crap beaten out of them by the Avid. Anyway, the difference in technical prowess is perfectly clear now. It's been proven now… Our mobile knights are the strongest out there."

Engineers from other weapons factories were reacting in much the same way…except for those from the First, who were hastily leaving the spectator coliseum.

Wallace was disgusted by Nias's glee. "This is why I don't like engineers or scientists. Don't you see where this is going? Liam's basically just declared war against House Berkeley."
Kurt respected Wallace's apprehension, but he didn't doubt Liam's chances one bit. "If a war it is, Liam will win. He's unbeatable, after all."
Eila blushed, seeing Kurt believe so firmly in his friend. "Yeah, I trust Liam will win, too."
Wallace wanted to believe the two of them, but he couldn't prevent tears from filling his eyes. "Really? Are you sure? 'Cause my life will be over if he loses too."
Wallace's life was riding on Liam's victory, but Eila seemed more focused on the here and now. "Anyway, you think they'll continue the tournament?"
Right then, an announcement came over the loudspeakers to let the spectators know that the tournament had been canceled, just as Eila feared. After what had just happened, this development came as no surprise to those in attendance. Nevertheless, Nias's shoulders slumped with disappointment.
"That's too bad… I wanted to witness more of the Avid in action."
Seeing Nias's genuine disappointment, Wallace again expressed his disgust about the people around Liam. "How can you say something like that in a situation like this? Honestly, only weirdos seem to hang out with Liam." He shook his head exasperatedly.

***

In her room at the primary school's student dorms, Rosetta woke up in unfamiliar pajamas. She put a hand to her chest and an attendant called out to her.
"Is something the matter, Lady Rosetta?"
She looked toward the attendant but wasn't sure what to say to her. "Huh? Uh… Err…"
The reason she was so tongue-tied was that she wasn't used to a lifestyle that involved having attendants. Why was this servant here in the room with her? Where was she, anyway? The attendant quickly answered these questions before she could ask them.
"As you were feeling unwell, I was entrusted with looking after you. We've received permission from the primary school to attend to you, so don't worry about that."
Rosetta nodded timidly. Her ringlets had been undone, so her hair was now simply long and straight. She had an understanding of her present circumstances now, but there was one thing she was still uncertain of. Had all that transpired merely been a dream? A part of her feared that it had.
"A-and the marriage?"

“Her Lady Duchess Claudia has approved of the engagement,” the attendant explained. “You will be wed to Lord Liam when the two of you have completed your education, my lady.”
Rosetta was still struggling to digest all that was happening to her. Engagement? Her family held the rank of duke, but rank was all they had. Since she had nothing else to offer him, the only reason Liam would want to have anything to do with her was so he would become the duke.
“I-I see. Lord Liam is doing all this just so he can shift our peerage to himself so he can become a duke.”
The attendant shook her head. “There’s no reason for House Banfield to take on massive debt just for the sake of peerage. You are aware of that, aren’t you, Lady Rosetta?”
Peerage alone was meaningless. Rosetta knew that better than anyone.
“But I don’t understand. Why would he go to all this trouble to take *me* as his wife?”
The attendant giggled.
“Wh-what is it?”
“I must apologize for being envious, Lady Rosetta. You see, you are the first woman Lord Liam has ever desired so fervently.”
Rosetta lowered her head, cheeks flushed, not having expected to hear something like that. This attendant would have her believe that Liam desired *her*, not her peerage, enough that he was willing to shoulder her family’s crushing debt. Rosetta had never imagined a man would court her for that reason.
“A-are you certain?”
“Quite certain. It’s all his retainers ever worry about—in his domain, he’s never shown any interest in women.”
Rosetta allowed the servant to help her lay back down in bed.
“Please rest some more, my lady.”
The primary school was in no state to hold classes after the incident Derrick had caused. No date had been given yet for classes to resume, so Rosetta was told she could take it easy in the meantime.
She let her eyes close slowly.
If this is only a dream, then I’m not ready to wake up yet. If I do have to wake up, I want to keep dreaming for a little while longer…

***

In a conference room at the primary school, I was being grilled by the staff. Well, I say grilled, but it was my retainers beside me who were the ones responding to the teachers’ lecture. In fact, my loyal retainers were practically intimidating these people on my behalf. Marie in particular was quite amusing.
“There was no reason to go so far as killing him.”

And what do you think Marie said in response to that nonsense from one of the teachers?
“Just turn the other cheek when someone tries to kill you? Is that the sort of soft nonsense you teach here, where you’re supposed to be instilling a noble’s dignity in the children of the Empire? You should applaud Lord Liam for showing a display of backbone to the other students. Besides, his opponent could only participate in the tournament by accepting the risk that he might lose his life, isn’t that right? There’s no issue whatsoever, then.”
Marie had a retort for each of the teachers’ criticisms, and her subordinates backed her up, saying it was Derrick’s fault for losing, not mine for winning. Meanwhile, all I had to do was drink tea and watch the exchange play out.
This is what it’s like to win…to be a villain.
“B-but there will be people who hold a grudge against House Banfield because of this.”
With those words, I decided maybe it was time for me to say something.
“What of it? I’m used to being resented by people who are the ones in the wrong. What’s one more stupid grudge to add to the list? Why did I have to put up with his abuse in the first place? This only happened because *you* didn’t stop Derrick before things went this far.”
I laid the blame squarely on the teachers of the primary school, and I talked down to them even though I was merely their charge. None of the teachers took umbrage with that. It seemed that the hefty donations I’d made to the school carried some weight.
Marie nodded. “You’re exactly right, Lord Liam.” She truly was the perfect yes-man.
“Lord Liam, we understand the circumstances, and it is true that the primary school is also at fault for this incident. We just mean to say that your response was excessive. We’re simply asking for a little remorse…”
I snorted when the stuck-up headmaster of the school asked me for remorse. “Remorse?” Why beat around the bush? “How much?”
“Excuse me?”
“I’m asking how much you want. How much money will it take to shut these incompetent mouths I’m listening to?”
Several of the teachers shot up from their seats in anger, but one glare from Marie sat them back down. She was more impressive than I’d originally given her credit for. Some of the teachers were even trembling.
Amused as I was by the situation, I had to remind myself I still hadn’t graduated yet and had to be at this school for a while longer. If I incurred the teachers’ wrath, it was sure to affect my remaining time on campus. I decided to play nice.
“Forgive me for getting carried away. I know this apology isn’t enough to properly express my remorse, so next year I’ll double my contribution to the school’s coffers to make up for what I’ve done.”
“B-but that won’t solve anything.”

What? That's not enough? Are you kidding me? I said double! How much money do you think I'm willing to donate to this stupid school?
"Hey now, are you really complaining after all the money I've donated? What's the problem? Are you saying a fine isn't sufficient punishment for my supposed transgressions?"
The principal raised his hand to quiet his clamoring teachers. "We merely wish to issue you a stern warning for this incident, my lord. I hope you can understand that."
So they're letting me off the hook, but they want to make a show of doing their job by scolding me. My money is enough to shut them up, but they're too embarrassed to come out and admit that, so they're keeping up appearances by giving me this tongue-lashing. Their hypocrisy makes me sick, but I do like that my money has this sway over them. I can make as much money as I want with my alchemy box, after all. This doesn't hurt my wallet one bit.
"Then if we're finished here, I'll be going."
I stood and left the conference room, my people following after me. At the door, I glanced back and saw the teachers all holding their heads in consternation.

***

After Liam had left the conference room, Mr. John crossed his arms.
He doesn't mince words. And there was nothing I could say back to him.
Liam had told them that if the staff had been more on top of things, none of this would have happened, and his accusation caused the gathered teachers to feel at fault.
Liam's words had stung the principal just as much. "I'd *planned* to give Baron Berkeley a stern warning…"
All Liam had really done was stave off the sparks falling on him. The school couldn't turn a blind eye to Derrick's behavior, and they had no intent to place all the blame for the situation on Liam. However, it was also true that Liam had egged Derrick on, and they felt as though they had to scold him for that.
"It's no wonder he's called a child prodigy," the principal said with an exhausted sigh and his feelings clear on his face. "He's got it more together than most adults."
Mr. John wanted to sigh, too. Sure, delinquents are trouble, but it can be hard handling students who are capable beyond their years too.

***

That night, I went out into the courtyard of the student dorms and swung around my super heavy wooden sword. Rather than rely solely on the

school's physical education program, I had to take the time to train like this occasionally so my own particular skills wouldn't get rusty.
While I stood toweling away my sweat, Kukuri poked his head out from behind a tree.
"What is it?"
"We've finished our investigation into those observing the duchess's family, Master Liam. The organization had grown larger than we expected. It seems they'd done some digging into other families' weaknesses instead of just tormenting House Claudia."
I guess they were up to more than we thought.
"They had a lot of time on their hands, huh?"
"We've seized all of their records. What would you like us to do with them?"
If my team had managed to get ahold of all their records this quickly, it probably didn't amount to anything too impressive. Even in larger than expected numbers, I figured these guys ultimately hadn't been capable of taking that much action. All Kukuri said was "a little larger than we expected," too. Anyway, I wasn't especially interested in the weaknesses of other houses. If I wanted to threaten someone, I could investigate them myself, and I'd probably just threaten them with my military might. The gathered information didn't pique my interest, but wouldn't it be a waste to just throw it out?
"Send their records home and ask Brian for your orders with it. Tell him to make good use of it."
"As you wish."
Kukuri faded into the shadows and vanished. The magic he and his men used seemed awfully handy.
"Well, guess I'll sweat a little more. I'm really out of shape…"
I noticed when I was piloting the Avid that the machine performed better than I did. I'd have to work on whipping myself back into shape for a bit.

***

Rosetta paid a visit to the boys' dorm.
"Erm… This is it, right?"
She stood in front of Liam's room, nervous for some reason. Her heart was pounding, and she was anxious about her appearance. She kept touching her ringlets and making sure her clothing was neat. She had taken a deep breath and was about to knock, but Kurt called out to her in passing by.
"Need something with Liam?"
"Huhyah?!"
Kurt apologized for scaring Rosetta into emitting her strangely adorable shriek.
"Sorry. Did I startle you?"
Rosetta hunched over and blushed, ashamed of her outburst. "I-I'm fine."
"O-oh. Err, you're looking for Liam, right?"

As Kurt cocked his head, Rosetta told him why she was there.
“Th-that’s right… There’s something I wish to discuss with him. I want him to do something about these people.”
Standing behind Rosetta were the two female knights assigned to her by House Banfield. Several attendants had also been caring for her, but all of it was making her uncomfortable. These women had been dispatched from Liam’s domain in order to care for her for a short while, and they intimidated any men who dared to get anywhere near her. As Rosetta was Liam’s fiancée, they were extremely wary of any other men in her vicinity. Kurt’s presence, of course, was allowed, as he was Liam’s friend.
“Huh? They didn’t tell you where Liam was?”
Kurt looked at the female knights. One of them frowned and said, “She didn’t ask us. We didn’t know what she was going to the boys’ dorm for.”
Rosetta wasn’t used to having underlings, so she hadn’t even thought to ask her bodyguards to direct her to Liam. Realizing that, she blushed and looked away.
“I-is he not here?”
Kurt volunteered to take Rosetta where Liam was, his voice gentle. “I know where he’ll be at this time. I’ll take you to him.”
Thus, Kurt guided Rosetta to the courtyard of the boys’ dorm. Large as it was, the courtyard was more like a park, complete with a fountain and benches. There, they spotted Liam standing under a large tree, wooden sword in his hands. Rosetta started walking over to him, but Kurt stopped her.
“You should stay back for now.”
“Why?”
Kurt pointed at the bisected leaves that lay all around Liam. When they saw that, Rosetta’s bodyguards all gulped. His skills must have been impressive even to these highly trained women.
“It’s dangerous to be near Liam when he’s concentrating like this,” Kurt cautioned Rosetta. “He doesn’t like being interrupted either, so you’re better off waiting until he’s finished.”
“What do you mean?”
Rosetta was left confused when Kurt told her she might be cut, while Liam simply stood there unmoving, holding his sword.
Kurt scratched his head and laughed without really explaining it. “It’s weird, right? I was completely speechless the first time I saw it too. Liam’s only gotten this far by pushing himself for many long years. Sure, he’s got innate talent, but he works harder than anyone to improve it.”
When Rosetta saw Liam working hard in spite of his natural talent, she realized that he wasn’t the sort of person she believed him to be.
It’s not that he could do everything from the beginning just because of his talent… Am I just jealous of someone who works this hard?
She had thought that Liam could get results without even trying, and she’d envied him for that, but now that Kurt had told her how Liam never

neglected to put in effort, she was embarrassed by how narrow-minded she had been.
I never thought there could be someone who embodied my ideals so completely. To think I've been so envious of him… How pathetic of me.
Rosetta turned to leave, too ashamed to even show her face to Liam.
"You're not going to talk to him?" Kurt asked.
"Not right now. I can't show myself to him like this."
"Oh."

***

At House Banfield's mansion, Serena had urgently contacted the prime minister. A tense expression took the place of her usual composed demeanor. In her hand was a storage medium containing the documents House Banfield had obtained from the Observers.
The prime minister's face appeared on the communications monitor.
"What's the emergency?"
Serena gave him only a quick greeting before getting right to the matter at hand.
"It's these documents that House Banfield obtained from the Observers. Not only were they monitoring House Claudia, but it seems they were engaging in some manner of espionage as well. Their rats apparently got into some rather secure places."
She transmitted some of the documents over to him, and the prime minister went pale on the other side of the screen as he verified them. He tapped his fingers against his desk, visibly irritated. After all, the information Serena had sent him pertained to the prime minister himself.
"I'll take care of this here. The original documents?"
"The information on you has already been destroyed."
"It seems I've forced you to take on some additional work. I'll be sure to thank you for it properly later."
"What would you like done with the rest of the documents? Brian isn't sure how to proceed."
"What did the count have to say about them?"
"He wasn't interested."
The Observers had gathered information on a lot of nobles, not just the prime minister. But Liam had entrusted the documents to Brian. This had left Brian in a tough spot, and at his wits' end, unsure of what to do with the information in his hands.
"Encourage him to hand it over to the Empire. I'll accept the material myself. This is an opportunity to get some dirt on the nobles they investigated. There's meaning in them just knowing that I have that information."
"You've got a nasty look in your eyes, again."

“It happens when you’re prime minister. Now then, I should start cleaning this up. Thanks for your stellar work, as always.”
Serena bowed her head, relieved that the matter had been passed on to him, and ended the call.

***

Once Derrick’s funeral and the school year’s closing ceremony were behind us, we were ready to face our fourth year at school. First, though, there would be a long, much-needed break. As a count, I headed back to my own domain for the first time in a while, planning to relax.
“First time home in three years. Not much has changed.”
I arrived home to find no notable differences to the scenery. The last time I was gone for a few years, a lot had been different upon my return., This time, the changes were meager.
Wallace looked around at my mansion, luggage in hand. He’d come home with me since he couldn’t go back to the palace now that he wasn’t a prince anymore.
“Whew! I’m tired from that long journey. You’ll get me some personal attendants and guards, won’t you, Liam? I’d love it if they were all beauties, too. Young women, please. I had a hard time in the palace; it was all evil old hags. I’d like lavish meals, too. I’m so sick of the frugal menus at the primary school.”
What’s with all the demands? Who does this guy think he is? He’s my underling!
Just as I was entertaining the notion of throwing him out, Serena walked up to Wallace.
“It’s been a long time, Your Highness Prince Wallace. May I ask who these ‘evil old hags’ you refer to are?”
Serena wore a smile, but Wallace was trembling, looking aghast.
“Eeeeeeeeeek!”
Wallace screamed as if he’d seen a ghost, and Serena went on smiling classily.
“My, that’s not very polite, Your Ex-Highness. Am I some sort of ghoul?”
Wallace ducked behind me. “I-I’d rather see a ghoul! Liam, what’s the head maid doing here?”
“Why wouldn’t she be here? We hired her.”
“You hired *her*? Serena? Why?!”
I guess Wallace isn’t too fond of Serena. Looks like I’ll be putting her in charge of taking care of him over the break, then.
I finished dealing with Wallace and turned around, smiling at the appearance of the guest of honor. I couldn’t see my own face, but I was sure my grin was positively wicked.
Behind Wallace and myself trailed a very uncomfortable-looking Rosetta. I’d forced her to come home with me for the long break.

Among the group welcoming us home was House Claudia's head and former head, Rosetta's mother and grandmother. The two of them came over to me and thanked me tearfully.
"I don't know how to thank you, my lord," gushed her mother.
"I'm so glad we were able to meet you like this," said her grandmother.
I didn't know what Brian had said to convince them of agreeing to the engagement, but they seemed to trust me with all their hearts. I was amused by the humility the two women showed me, but Rosetta looked rather flustered.
Hey, wait, shouldn't you be a bit more arrogant? I wanted her to act more openly frustrated. I jerked my chin to signal Serena, and she guided the two older women over to Rosetta.
When the three of them were reunited, they embraced and cried, overcome with emotion. This isn't really what I was expecting… I thought she'd sob something like, "He's taking our peerage! I'm so sorry, Mother, Grandmother!" Instead, she just seems happy about seeing them again. Well, I guess that's fine for now. The real fun's yet to come, after all.
And the three women weren't the only ones crying… Brian was weeping as well, as he watched their emotional reunion from a slight distance.
"What an auspicious day it was when your engagement was made official, Master Liam. I'm so happy, I could just cry. Oh, and this touching reunion! I know an old man like myself should hardly be carrying on this way, but I just can't help it!"
"You're always crying. Would you cut it out already? Nobody wants to see a dude cry."
It was the first time I had seen Brian in a while, and I gave him my unvarnished opinion. He seemed a little happy about it.
"I'm so grateful for your cold reception! This is the way Master Liam must be!"
Brian would apparently be happy with whatever I said to him. I turned from him and searched for Amagi, who should have been waiting for me. I finally spotted her among the maid robots waiting in the back and I wondered why she hadn't come forward. What was she lingering back there for?
"Amagi, we're going to my room," I told her as I started in that direction, but she seemed hesitant.
"Is that all right, Master?"
"Is what all right?"
It wasn't like Amagi to be acting so uncertain, but I found it rather cute. I forced her to come along with me anyway.
"Whatever, just come on. I have some stuff I want to ask you."
"Very well, sir."

***

As he watched Liam head for his room, Wallace wasn't sure what to think.

“I guess that rumor about him liking dolls was true.”
Robots equipped with artificial intelligence like Amagi were a subject of scorn throughout the Empire. Nobles in particular tended to be prejudiced against them and would never keep them so close.
Her face grave, Serena cleared her throat and gave Wallace a warning.
“Lord Wallace, if you would rather not meet your end in this mansion, I suggest not uttering the word ‘doll’ in Amagi’s vicinity. Master Liam will not allow anyone to insult Amagi. Your head will roll, and I don’t mean that metaphorically; I am being quite literal. Not even I would be able to protect you.”
Wallace nodded over and over again. “O-of course. I would never have anything bad to say about Liam’s personal preferences!”
Kurt and Eila mentioned this too, but I didn’t think it was true! I better be careful.
Wallace wasn’t stupid enough to anger his precious patron.
“I would hope not,” Serena said. “Speaking frankly, Master Liam *is* rather eccentric, isn’t he? I’m surprised he would become the patron of a man who has nothing to offer him.”
Wallace heaved a sigh at her. Huh? She has a rather low opinion of me, doesn’t she?
“Serena, I *am* still a former Imperial prince, you know.”
“Of course. However, it’s Master Liam I serve now. There’s nothing odd about me looking after the best interests of House Banfield, is there?”
“N-no.”
“I’m glad you understand. Now then, I will endeavor to take the utmost care of you as our very important guest, Lord Wallace.”
When he heard that Serena would be looking after him for the entirety of his stay at House Banfield, Wallace sank to his knees on the spot…and openly wept.

Chapter 8:
The Engagement Ceremony

IN MY PERSONAL ROOM in the mansion, I lay spread-eagle on my bed with Amagi's lap serving as my pillow. This sensation really made me feel that I was home.
"Amagi, how's Rosetta doing?"
"She was shown around the mansion and is presently resting in her chambers, happily chatting with her family."
That's not very interesting. I wanted Rosetta to despair more, or show a little rebelliousness. She must just be happy about reuniting with her family. I'll give her a little more time.
"That's too bad. I think she should have a little more awareness about her situation. You know, like how I'm stealing everything from her."
"Everything? So you slept with her already?"
That made me pause.
"Huh? Why?"
Amagi gave me a troubled look, which was a little cute. No, it was *really* cute.
"Master, you will be taking a wife, so if you continue concerning yourself only with me, your betrothed will fall out of love with you."
"Well, I'll just get rid of her, then. And that's that."
I would never let anyone try to take Amagi from me.
"If you were to abandon Lady Rosetta, you would lose the trust noble society has placed in you. You would lose your new peerage as well."
"Then I guess I'll lock her up, instead. I don't want a woman who complains about what I do."
My wife in my previous life had been that way before our divorce. She would complain about everything I did. I still remember one incident where she complained about a present I bought for her and she ended up throwing it in the trash. It made me sick to recall my humiliation. I wished I could see her again, just so I could kill her with my own hands. I wondered if the Guide would bring her soul here if I asked him to. No, on second thought, I didn't actually want to ever see her again, in any form.
I should take out all these negative feelings on Rosetta. I know it's misplaced frustration, but I bet it would be entertaining. And she'll resist, so I can thoroughly—
"Master."
"What is it?" Amagi snapped me out of my fantasy by calling for me.
"Lady Rosetta is to be your wife. Please be kind to her."
I couldn't respond to that. After all, I had chosen Rosetta to be my wife in order to torment her. I couldn't deny that the constant pressure from Amagi and Brian to find myself a wife had contributed to my decision as well.

I turned my face away, remaining silent, and Amagi stroked my head.
“We are planning the engagement ceremony for after your graduation.”
“I see… No, wait.” I sat up and turned to face Amagi.
“Is something the matter?”
“We’ll have the engagement ceremony right away. We’ll do it during this long break. Begin the preparations immediately!”
“Immediately? Even if we hurry, there is simply not enough time.”
“I don’t care. You’re thinking about a lavish ceremony for Rosetta, right? It can be a modest affair; it doesn’t matter, just so long as we can do it right away.”
“There is Lady Rosetta’s education to consider, as well. At minimum, she will require one month in an education capsule.”
At this point in her life, Rosetta had only had the bare minimum of education and physical strengthening in an education capsule, resulting in her unfortunate grades at primary school. To help this, we planned on putting her in an education capsule over long breaks in the hopes of raising her grades a little.
“Then throw her in now while we start preparing for the ceremony.”
“Very well.”
Maybe a rushed engagement ceremony would wake the steel-hearted Rosetta up to the reality of her situation, and speeding things up would enable me to steal the position of duke from House Claudia all the sooner. We still wouldn’t be officially married, but I’d be in a position of “duke-to-be.” Then after our noble training was finished, we’d have the wedding, and my position would be secured.
“I can’t wait,” I said aloud.
Rosetta… Your despair has only just begun.

***

“You cur! How shameless can you be?”
Wearing the white dress I’d ordered for our engagement ceremony, Rosetta glared at me.
“That expression of yours is ruining the effect of your beautiful dress. How about acting a little happier, huh?”
I gave her a worried look and Rosetta turned away from me. She must not have wanted me to see her face all scrunched up in frustration. The sight of this alone was enough to entertain me, so I rewarded her with some cheap words.
“You look stunning, Rosetta. Like you truly belong at my side.”
I could hear the fabric of her white gloves creaking as she clenched her fists.
“Shameless! Don’t you feel pathetic obtaining your title with money?”

If anyone else had said that to me, I would have warmed my blade with them. Since it was Rosetta, though, I walked over to her with a broad grin on my face and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at me.
“Your family bowed to that money, you know. How does it feel, having your precious peerage taken from you? Tell me, daughter of a duchess. No… There’s a more important title in your future now, isn’t there? You’re my bride-to-be, after all.”
“For it to be stolen by *you*, of all people…”
Rosetta desperately held back tears, but her eyes were wet with the vexation of losing one of the few things supporting her: her peerage. I snickered and let go of her.
“No matter how much it upsets you, you’re my bride-to-be. Let’s get along, Rosetta.”
Rosetta crumpled to the floor, clenching her teeth and glaring up at me.
“I *will* take my peerage back. I won’t lose to you.”
I slipped my hands in my pockets and turned to leave the room, but I paused for a parting line.
“I’m looking forward to it. Show me your struggle.”
It’s gonna go like this! I’m sure of it!
I was full of satisfaction. Now that she had settled in a bit, Rosetta’s steely will had resurfaced. Her proud resolve would afford me plenty of entertainment.
“I can’t wait!”
As I imagined how this future scene might play out, Amagi watched me from my side. She wore an expression that was hard to describe on her face.
“As long as you are enjoying yourself, Master.”

***

In the room housing the education capsule at House Banfield’s mansion, doctors and security maid robots stood around Rosetta. The young woman wore only thin clothing to hide her body.
“This doesn’t look like the simple education capsule we have at home.”
House Banfield’s high-performance capsule was nothing like the one Rosetta’s family owned. Female technicians, who specialized in running the device, performed adjustments to the machine while a female doctor explained Rosetta’s treatment plan to her.
“We’ll just be doing some short-term adjustments this time. Including the necessary physical therapy afterward, the process will take about a month.”
“That’s almost my whole break.”
When Rosetta hung her head, one of the doctors moved closer to console her.
“We’re aware of your grandmother’s condition. I’m sure you’d prefer to be by her side as much as you can, but this was Lord Liam’s decision.”
“Yes, I know. I know that it’s what my grandmother wants too.”

She wiped her tears away. Her grandmother wasn't in good health. Liam had authorized the use of an elixir to restore her, but all that elixirs could treat were illness and injury. They couldn't prolong someone's natural lifespan. In other words, Rosetta's grandmother was simply reaching the end of her time. It was possible to prolong it somewhat, but not by much. In reality, Liam had used an elixir already, but there wasn't much effect. Rosetta making use of the education capsule was essentially her grandmother's last wish.
Regarding the education capsule, the doctor told her, "We'll do what we can in this short period, Lady Rosetta, but please remember this is merely a stopgap measure. You'll need to make more serious use of the capsule after you graduate from primary school."
Rosetta looked up, her expression stiff.
"I understand."
Before entering the capsule, Rosetta removed her clothing and lowered her nude body into the liquid inside. Once fully inside the capsule, she curled up like a fetus.
Grandmother, you have to live long enough to see the engagement ceremony…
Her consciousness grew distant, and her education and physical strengthening commenced.

***

Thomas Henfrey, Liam's personal merchant, was in quite a panic.
"Hurry! We need to get everything ready for the ceremony as soon as we can!"
The date for Count Banfield's engagement ceremony had been officially announced, but it left little time for preparation. Thomas' employees worked as quickly as they could to load containers onto a ship bound for House Banfield's planet.
One of Thomas' bustling people complained aloud. "Why the big hurry? Can't he hold the engagement ceremony after he graduates from primary school?"
Thomas explained the situation as they worked.
"It's his fiancée, Lady Rosetta. Her grandmother doesn't have much time left, I'm afraid."
Those words were enough for the employee to get the picture. Liam was rushing the ceremony because he wanted Rosetta's grandmother to be there for her big day, and Thomas was doing his best to make that happen for him.
"She's had a rough time of it until now. If we don't work our butts off here, we can't rightfully call ourselves House Banfield's personal merchants. Sorry, but I'm counting on you, all right?"
The employee quit his complaining and got back to work.

***

It was weird.
Things had definitely become weird inside my domain.
My domain had always been a strange place with strange fads and fashions, but the current trend was…a moving story about me. I didn't understand why, but people seemed to think I was rushing the engagement ceremony for the sake of Rosetta's grandmother.
At the moment, I sat watching the news on a monitor, and the anchor was talking about that very subject.
"Lord Liam's fiancée Lady Rosetta has led a rather troubled life."
The news story began with a look at Rosetta's past, relating in detail the horrible treatment that House Claudia had suffered up until now. Even I was taken aback by what the story laid out. It was far worse than what I'd heard from Wallace.
Then, the news story shifted into talking about how great I was for having saved Rosetta and taking her as my fiancée. My domain's mass media was under my control, but it was honestly kind of creepy that they were flattering me *this* much. Did they have an ulterior motive or something?
"Lady Rosetta's grandmother, the former duchess, is unwell and not long for this world."
I'd heard that they were using elixirs to extend her life, if only just a little. I permitted their use myself, in fact, in the hopes that she could participate in the ceremony. It wasn't to "save" her, though. I just thought that having her dying grandmother attend would make the ceremony more painful for Rosetta. I wanted to see Rosetta humiliated in front of her grandmother for having the peerage she tried to protect be pried away from her. Yet, apparently, everyone thought I was just being nice to her.
I had only found this out that very day. I had no idea they were shaping the situation into this maudlin, noble tale.
As I watched this in my private chambers, I looked over at Amagi as she attended to me. I pointed at the screen.
"What is this about?"
Amagi, who'd been with me for a long time, knew exactly what I was asking.
"Your engagement to Lady Rosetta is very moving, Master. Many people are enjoying the story. There are even plans to portray the events in a movie and a serialized drama."
"That can't be true."
"It is."
I guess they all want to spin me and Rosetta meeting into some grand tale of destiny. There wasn't a single thing like that about how we met, but I guess they wanted it to be a moving tale. Are the people in my domain okay? Is there a riot coming or something? Have I squeezed too much out of them? Maybe I should lay off a bit and start taxing them more later.

“Amagi, see to it that taxes are reduced. Just a little, though.”
“A rather abrupt request. Though, as the engagement ceremony is a joyous event, the tax reduction can be done in its honor.”
“That’s it! I just want to let up a little on the people so they’re not feeling all stressed out.”
“I shall arrange it.”
I was starting to get concerned about my subjects. Why were they publishing heartwarming stories about a guy who taxed their incomes so much? Were they trying to convince themselves that I was some wonderful person? *Doubt me more! Are you all stupid?!*
No, wait… I can use this situation.
When Rosetta found out that our humiliating meeting had been warped into some kind of feel-good story, how exasperated would that make her? I imagined the amusing expression of frustration I’d get to see on her face every time she saw mention of that serialized drama and theatrical movie.
Smirking, I said, “I’m looking forward to this engagement ceremony.”
“I am glad you are enjoying yourself, Master,” Amagi said with a smile as she watched over me.

***

The long break from primary school was approaching its end.
Numerous guests had come to stay at House Banfield’s mansion. In a handsome formal outfit, Wallace mingled among them, sipping a beverage.
“I was picturing a much more lavish party. This is sort of understated.”
Kurt and Eila had been invited too, and therefore, they wore formal clothing as well.
“It looks pretty lavish to me,” Kurt remarked.
“Yeah! This is a huge party from a baron’s point of view,” Eila added.
The two of them were from families with a lower status than Liam, so what was lowkey for him seemed extravagant to them. Wallace felt differently, having been an Imperial prince and thus being more familiar with noble society.
“It’s very subdued for a count’s celebration. Not frugal, I would say, but just that it’s sort of comforting how it’s not very eccentric.”
Many nobles enjoyed throwing very strange parties with unexpected themes to see how much they could surprise or shock their guests.
Wallace went on, “Other than bucket parties, though, you can count on one hand the number of those crazy theme parties have actually succeeded.”
Kurt perked up when Wallace mentioned the infamous bucket party.
“The bucket party is really the standard for eccentric parties, huh?”
“Yeah. I’ve attended a few of them, and they really are something. It’s no wonder they’re the standard. The person who thought that up was a genius.”

“I want to go to one, just once…” Eila sighed enviously, cupping a glass in both hands.
Wallace frowned. “Well, they’re nice when they’re successful, but a failed bucket party will be one of your worst memories.”
Liam’s gathering was buffet-style, so the attendees drifted about carrying drinks and plates of food. Kurt looked around for familiar faces.
“A lot of nobles are here. My father was having a real time of it earlier, trying to greet them all.”
More nobles had come for the engagement ceremony than had attended Liam’s coming-of-age ceremony. That was the proof of the power he’d gained since then.
Is this what Liam was after? Wallace wondered to himself.
Liam had practically announced his open hostility toward House Berkeley. Wallace had feared this would drive many nobles away, but those with good sense were gravitating toward him instead. There were probably many who were waiting to see what would come of his declaration before making a move, but Wallace was surprised to see how many allies Liam was already making.
If more noble houses get involved, this conflict between House Banfield and House Berkeley could turn into a proxy war inside the Empire.
If so, it would be a contest between the high-minded nobility and the villainous. With Liam, of course, representing the high-minded.
It couldn’t be… Could it?

***

Rosetta and I were in a waiting room, preparing for the engagement ceremony to commence.
Serving as Rosetta’s personal bodyguard was Marie, who had volunteered for the duty. She waited quietly and wore a knight’s impressive formal attire.
At my side was Tia, also in formal knight’s attire. Both knights were quiet and composed, trying to blend into the background so as not to get in the way of my conversation with Rosetta.
Rosetta was dressed in the pure white dress she had tried on before her time in the education capsule. Additionally, she wore a veil over her face, so I couldn’t see her expression.
I told her, “You look beautiful, Rosetta.”
I’d fantasized about this moment again and again, but now that the time had come for the real thing, it was hard for me to actually utter the shameless lines I’d practiced. I supposed I was more nervous than I had expected.
Rosetta’s only response was the trembling of her shoulders.
“Nervous? That’s fine. It’s almost time. Don’t think you’re getting away, now.”

Aside from that little warning, I couldn't manage any of the taunting and gloating things I'd planned on saying at this point. Well, I'd have plenty of time for that sort of fun later. There was no need to rush.
"Let's go," I said to Tia.
"Yes, sir."
I left the room with my escort, still regretting that I hadn't practiced more lines beforehand.

***

When Liam and Tia left the waiting room, Rosetta's trembling grew stronger.
"Wh-wh-what do I do, Marie?! I couldn't answer him at all. Do you think he was mad? Was he disgusted with me?"
Rosetta turned to Marie for support as she had been too nervous to respond to Liam. When Marie looked back at her, she simply saw her long-dead friend.
"Not at all. Lord Liam understands you're nervous, Lady Rosetta. There's nothing to worry yourself over."
Her blood really flows in this girl's veins. She's just so sweet.
Two thousand years earlier, Marie had been something of a wild and uncultured knight, and it had been the daughter of House Claudia who had taught her how to speak and conduct herself like a lady. Rosetta's ancestor was never frightened of Marie and had become fast friends with the wild girl. They lived in different worlds, but Rosetta's ancestor accepted Marie without prejudice. In fact, she would sometimes play pranks on the knight, and those days of laughter were bittersweet memories for her now.
She was so nervous before her wedding, too.
Marie couldn't help smiling as she gazed upon Rosetta. She noticed Rosetta had hung her head, though, so Marie asked her worriedly, "Is something wrong?"
"Err… There's been so much happening, I haven't really thought about it before this, but…what should I call Liam? We're engaged, but just calling him by his name doesn't seem right somehow."
Rosetta looked embarrassed, as if she expected Marie to say, "What in the world are you talking about at a time like this?" But Marie just considered it for a moment.
Now that I think of it, there was a term of endearment she used when addressing the man she loved, wasn't there? Recalling what her old friend had called her husband, Marie gave Rosetta a suggestion.
"You wouldn't want to call him the same thing his friends do, I should think. What about 'Darling,' then?"
"Darling?"
"Yes. No one else would ever call him that, so it would be a special pet name only you could use."

“Darling… R-right. I’ll call him that, then!”
Marie smiled, watching Rosetta delight in her new nickname for Liam, while the other female knights and attendants nearby gave them somewhat dubious looks. Marie and Rosetta didn’t even notice.

***

The engagement ceremony had begun.
Sealing a vow with a kiss in front of a crowd of people was a custom that Earth and the Intergalactic Empire shared, it seemed. Some things weren’t too different, I mused, but I was also a bit preoccupied with wanting to see Rosetta’s face, as it was covered by that veil.
The celebrant who presided over the ceremony instructed us to make our vows, so we faced each other. This was the big moment of the day, and the part I was looking forward to the most as well. I was sure that beneath the veil, Rosetta was biting her lip or fighting back tears in bitter frustration. Or perhaps she was doing her best to show no expression at all, storing all her hatred for me deep inside her heart. Either way, this was a life-changing moment for a woman, and she was being forced into this bond with a man she didn’t even love. Rosetta must have been absolutely mortified.
“How does it feel, Rosetta?” I asked her sweetly.
She didn’t respond, probably too frustrated to even speak.
“Everything you have inherited is about to become mine. Your family, your peerage, and all that comes with it—it’s all mine now.”
I slowly lifted her veil, exposing her face from the bottom up. The first thing I saw was her chin. Her skin had always been clear, but its beauty was enhanced even more by makeup. I lifted her veil a little more and revealed her lips. Made vivid with lipstick, they looked luscious.
H-huh? Isn’t this strange? I thought she’d be gritting her teeth, but she’s not. Maybe she’s listless because her spirit is broken? Well, that’s just as satisfying, I guess.
Lifting the veil the rest of the way, I took in the sight of Rosetta’s whole face and saw that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were wet and shining, staring only at me.
Wait a second… What’s going on here? Why are you wearing that “maiden in love” face? Don’t tell me you’ve given up resisting! Aren’t you supposed to be the woman with the steel will?!
While I stared at Rosetta, dumbfounded by her unexpected expression, a single tear rolled down her cheek.
“I’m so grateful to you for accepting a girl like me. Darling, I… I’ll stay by your side forever!”
Darling?! Did… Did you eat something weird?
I was starting to suspect one of House Banfield’s doctors, wanting to make things easier for me, had brainwashed her while in the education capsule.

The maid robots had reported that the doctors had given her a standard program, though, and they wouldn't lie to me, but…
Rosetta closed her eyes and raised her face a little, taking a step toward me. I was surprised; I thought she would be a lot more unwilling when it came to this part.
Seeing Rosetta this way, and so up close, I couldn't deny how cute she was…even beautiful. In any case, to move the engagement ceremony along, I kissed her. As I did so, another tear ran down her cheek.
Maybe she's just trying to trick me. Th-that'd be okay, I guess. It would mean she's got enough spunk left to lull me into letting my guard down, so she can kill me in my sleep or whatever later.
I nervously removed my lips from hers.
"Rosetta… I'm looking forward to what comes next."
When I said that, what I hoped to convey was my intent to destroy her spirit. I grinned at her in what I intended to be a villainous manner. In return, Rosetta wiped her eyes and gave me an absolutely brilliant smile.
"Yes, Darling."

Hold on! Have you given up already?! I thought that part was supposed to come later, after you broke down and I turned you into a sobbing wreck! This isn't how Nitta told me these things went!

***

Laughter echoed through the venue at Liam's flustered reactions during the ceremony, but the guests weren't ridiculing him. They simply found his innocence heartwarming.

Among the crowd was Wallace, who studied the row of knights in Liam's service, standing off to one side. In particular, he eyed Liam's head knight Christiana and the next in rank beneath her, Marie. They were extraordinarily talented female knights, both of whom seemed to have appeared at House Banfield out of nowhere.

"Where is Liam finding his personnel? You'd be hard-pressed to find two knights at that level in the *palace*."

At the end of the engagement ceremony, letters of congratulations were read, one of them being from the prime minister. Wallace just quietly sipped his drink without reacting to it outwardly.

Does the prime minister have high hopes for Liam as well? No, that old timer isn't such a nice guy. He's probably just waiting to see if it's Liam or the Berkeleys who come out on top in their conflict.

Even so, that meant Liam was a significant enough figure in the Empire for the prime minister to have his eye on him.

Wallace smiled as he sipped from the alcoholic beverage in his hand. "I couldn't be happier, having a guy like Liam for my patron. I guess I should help him out a bit, too. Things wouldn't exactly be great for me if my patron were to disappear, after all."

Wallace was grinning, but Eila just gave him a sidelong look

"Why are you acting like you're so important?" she asked him coldly. "What do you think *you* can do for Liam?"

Eila was totally different with Wallace than she was with Liam and Kurt. Only with Wallace was she so cold and harsh.

"I-I can help him a little bit!"

"I dunno. It would probably help him more if you just stayed out of his way." Eila's words stabbed into Wallace's chest.

***

The knights, now off-duty, lingered in the banquet hall after the ceremony was finished, sitting at tables eating and drinking. Tia, Liam's head knight, was one of them, and she was overjoyed at Liam's engagement. Seated around her were many of the knights who had been captured by pirates and gone through hell with her before Liam had rescued them. What they discussed, naturally, was Liam.

“I’m just so happy to hear about Lord Liam’s engagement.”
“Didn’t you hope to be his first wife, Tia?”
“Of course not… I wouldn’t dream of it. Lord Liam shines far too brightly for someone like me. I’m happy just serving at his side.”
As Tia and her fellow knights chatted enthusiastically, a slightly different group approached their table. These were also knights who served Liam, but they were a bit of an odd group who had joined more recently. Their leader, another female knight, strode directly to Tia and brought her face right up to hers.
“So *you’re* Christiana? This is our first time speaking, isn’t it?”
When Marie addressed Tia by her name, the knights around them quieted. As a hush fell over the banquet hall, Tia sipped at her drink, looking up at Marie out of the corner of her eye.
“I suppose it is, mutt. Did you need something from me?”
Tia’s attitude toward Marie was just as rude, if not ruder.
“I heard you were captured by pirates. Don’t you think the position of Lord Liam’s head knight might be a bit too heavy for your delicate little shoulders?”
Marie mocked Tia, provoking her. And Tia couldn’t just let her ridicule go unremarked upon.
The knights who had been captured by pirates along with Tia and subjected to similar tortures, looked ready to draw their weapons on the spot.
In response to Marie’s insult, Tia jerked the glass in her hand and splashed its contents onto Marie.
“Bold words from someone who allowed herself and others to become petrified.”
Marie swiftly drew her sword and held the blade up to Tia’s neck, but in the same instant, Tia’s rapier was poised at Marie’s chest. The two had drawn their weapons and pointed them at each other in less than an eye blink, and now that they had, all the other knights around them drew their weapons, too.
Marie glared at Tia, but she sheathed her blade with a creepy smile. “I’m sure it will just be for a short while, but please do serve Lord Liam well as his head knight. I’ll be taking the position from you sooner or later.”
Tia sheathed her sword as well; her eyes were still glinting icily. “I don’t know, I think second-in-command might be a bit heavy for *you*. It’s no job for a senior citizen…or, should I say, a fossil?”
This provocation caused Marie to become crazed. “You whelp! I should crush you and turn you back into the pile of ground meat Lord Liam had the misfortune of discovering! Or perhaps you enjoyed being a pirate’s plaything, hm?”
“I’d like to see you try. I’ll turn you back into stone, and then smash you into so many tiny pieces that no one’ll make the mistake of reviving you again!”

Sparks flew between the two women. Of the knights watching this exchange, some were exasperated while others appeared to be thinking that both ladies should be taken down so they could become head knight themselves.
Some of the knights kept quiet, as if this dispute had nothing to do with them, but others allied themselves with either Tia or Marie. A violent clash between the two factions looked imminent.
When Liam had inherited his domain, House Banfield hadn't had many knights, but that was no longer the case. Some had volunteered to serve him because of his growing reputation, while others served him to pay back the debt they owed him for rescuing them from harrowing circumstances. Some wanted to improve their social status, and some simply wanted to prove their martial abilities. Basically, there were all sorts among them.
As House Banfield gained power, it also gained more and more talented knights. As these knights were all individually powerful, there wasn't yet someone who could keep them all in check.
Tia and Marie were the best candidates to fulfill that role, but the two of them had no intention of working together. Maybe one of them could have handled the position by herself, but instead, both had devoted too much focus on the position of head knight. Unfortunately, neither of the two planned on yielding to the other.
Marie started to walk away, and Tia watched with a look filled with bloodlust.
"Lord Liam doesn't need a mutt like you. I'll do him a favor and get rid of you for him."
Marie stopped and turned to look back at Tia, eyes ablaze.
"*You're* the one Lord Liam doesn't need. I'll prove that to you soon, ground meat woman."
The two female knights had gone from rivals to enemies.

***

Among the knights in the tense banquet hall was one who had started working for Liam relatively recently.
I picked the wrong house to serve.
The feud between Tia and Marie had quickly escalated from a shouting match to a situation that threatened to spill blood. The knight who had witnessed this sorry display and regretted his decision was named Claus Sera Mont. A tired-looking man with the appearance of someone in his thirties, he wasn't especially talented like Tia and Marie, but he wasn't incompetent either.
I only applied because the conditions looked good, but things are worse here than I could have imagined.
Claus had been dismissed from his previous position at another house. His dismissal had been for financial reasons, but the tragic reality was that

Claus was just too good of a person. He'd not only allowed his bosses and colleagues to take credit for his work, but even some of his subordinates as well, and as a result he hadn't built a good reputation for himself. He also tended to be the scapegoat for other people's blunders out of convenience. His personality was such that when other people begged him for things with tears in their eyes or asked him for favors, he couldn't say no. Before he knew it, he'd garnered a reputation for being an incompetent man who could barely perform his duties and who constantly made mistakes. Branded useless, when the house he served began to decline, he was quickly let go to cut costs.

The only place where he'd been able to find new employment was House Banfield, which had been severely lacking in knights. They'd been gaining power at that time, but had lacked vassals for several generations now, so they were rather desperate for new manpower. The fact that Claus, with his poor reputation, was able to be hired by them was proof that they weren't being too picky.

Now that he saw how things were playing out, though, with the organization and leadership of Liam's beefed-up force of knights, Claus couldn't help regretting that he'd applied here.

Still, I have my family to consider, so I can't exactly quit… Honestly, though, it's just as flawed as my previous workplace. Just in a different way.

Claus leaped at the offer from House Banfield because the conditions seemed good, and the treatment he received even now wasn't bad. Their pay was higher than average, and while they were kept busy, they got sufficient breaks too. If it were just about working conditions, House Banfield would be a vast improvement over his previous place of employment. This rising conflict between the two factions was terrible, though, and honestly too much for him to endure.

House Banfield had recruited some seriously talented knights, like Tia and Marie, but there was no unity among them as a whole. In fact, there were several different cliques with multiple powerful knights all vying for the position of Liam's head knight.

Claus gave a quiet sigh. This is no place for somebody like me.

With this many powerful but hotheaded knights trying to make names for themselves, Claus felt out of place as a knight who strove for professionalism and balance. He wanted to quit as soon as he could, but what other prospects were there for a knight with no accomplishments to his name and a reputation for being useless? His only option was to put up with things at House Banfield for now and hope that things would be sorted down the line.

This is just too much, though.

With the joyous engagement ceremony over, the atmosphere in the banquet hall should have been celebratory and harmonious. Instead, knights who all served the same family sat glaring at each other, seemingly ready to kill each other.

I want to go home. I just want to see my family's faces and go to bed.
Claus, a rather mundane knight, was very much worried whether he'd be able to continue serving House Banfield with all its extreme personalities.

***

Rosetta… I'm disappointed in you.
"Does this look good on me, Darling?"
"Yeah."
"Thank goodness. Amagi picked this one out for me!"
"Oh yeah?"
Rosetta didn't own any clothing or goods that were suitable for her position, so I had Thomas Henfrey bring a huge selection of merchandise. When I told her to pick whatever she liked from it, she'd done so with great enthusiasm, so now here she was happily modeling her selections for me.
I'd thought she was the woman with the formidable steel will, but that will had been broken all too easily, and her transition to her current contented state had been much too smooth.
This is bull!
Rosetta spun around in her new dress. Her ringlets floated into the air and then settled back down as she did. As long as I was only looking at her, she was a beautiful future wife. Also, due to her family's humble situation, her personality was reserved, and she didn't spend money as one would expect of a future duchess.
Not that I was concerned enough to look into it much. I didn't care about Rosetta's spending habits, after all. I was the one who actually paid for what she bought, but she stayed within the budget I'd allotted her. I would have complained if she had gone outside that budget, but to be honest, there was no need for me to worry about expenses.
Now I wondered if there had really been a need to rush the engagement ceremony. In any case, we'd both have to head back to school soon. I was wondering how things might be different for me there now when Rosetta bashfully called out to me.
"Darling, about our plans for tomorrow…"
"You want to go visit the grave, right? Should I come with you?"
Rosetta's grandmother had passed away peacefully in her sleep after living just long enough to witness her granddaughter's big day. Rosetta had bawled her eyes out. She'd recovered now but would probably become emotional and get lost in her memories when she visited the grave for the first time.
Since the ceremony, Rosetta's mother had tearfully thanked me over and over again for making it a reality, and for helping her grandmother live long enough to see it. On top of that, Rosetta never stopped referring to me as "Darling." How could this be happening? I hadn't expected all this praise from them.

While I mused about all this, a new chapter of a serialized drama began playing on the room's giant screen.
"Oh, it's already this late?"
This drama featured Rosetta as its heroine. I showed her the first installment, thinking it would frustrate her, but she became bashful about it instead. You're really okay with this? They've made our meeting into this feel-good story, but it wasn't like that at all, was it? Shouldn't you be exasperated about how they've misinterpreted everything? Why aren't you saying, "This is nothing like me!"
At best, Rosetta seemed bewildered by the show's portrayal of her. "They're treating me like I'm some sort of glamorous princess. I'm not like that."
The actress who played Rosetta in the drama was decently attractive.
Overall, Rosetta seemed pleased with the show, so I felt a bit relieved—
Wait, no I don't!
She sat down next to me on the couch to watch, blushing slightly. There was a bit of distance between the two of us, but she shifted closer, looking a little embarrassed by her actions.
Well, aren't you cute? But what's with this maiden in love routine you've got going on? Oh, woman of steel, where are you?
Rosetta watched the show with a look of confusion on her face. "I didn't live in a huge mansion like that." She made comments like that every so often, about how poor she actually was. It was hard to listen to.
Toward the end of the episode, a handsome actor portraying me appeared. I didn't really care what he looked like, but I wasn't sure how I felt about it. It irritated me that he was actually more attractive than I was, but if he'd been less attractive than me, that would have been annoying in its own way.
As for the plot of the show, the action started just before we entered primary school. The guy who played me was excessively cool, and all his lines portrayed him as a kind lord who cared about the wellbeing of his people. That just showed how badly my subjects misunderstood me. This was just their idealized image of me, an illusion they'd convinced themselves was reality. I wasn't a kind lord! I didn't care about my people at all.
I found myself curious about the filming location for this episode.
"Wait, that looks just like my mansion…"
While I marveled at how they'd managed to reproduce my mansion for the program, Brian came in with a little tea trolley. Not that I cared, but I noticed he looked like he was enjoying himself greatly. He just couldn't get enough of seeing me and Rosetta getting along, I guess.
"Pardon me… I've brought some refreshments."
Not knowing what to talk about with Rosetta, I chose to speak to Brian instead. "Look at this, Brian. It looks just like my mansion. Don't you think they've reproduced it well?"
As Brian poured tea, he explained, "Why, of course it resembles the mansion. We rented out a portion for them to film in. You know, sir, there

was a time when my aim was to become an actor myself, so I was perhaps more excited than I should be at my age, for having played a small part in the production."
This was the first I'd heard that the drama's production crew had been allowed to film here. My mansion was so excessively large that I hadn't run into them. No wonder the location looked so authentic—it was the real thing.
What, you were in on this, Brian? You should stick to one story about your youthful dreams, by the way. So were you going to be an adventurer, or an actor?
Brian bashfully admitted, "I was able to obtain an autograph from an actress I've always admired."
Oh, yeah? Good for you.
In the show, the strong-willed Rosetta met the noble me for the first time, and then the episode ended. I didn't know where to begin with my criticisms of the program. Rosetta seemed to have enjoyed it, at least, though she looked a little embarrassed too.
With the episode finished, she looked over at me. She appeared to be expecting something, but there was no way for me to know what it was if she didn't tell me.
As I was thinking that, Wallace burst into the room.
"Liam, let's go back to school!"
"We leave three days from now," I replied quickly, and Wallace made a face like it was the end of the world.
Rosetta gave him a displeased look.
"Is there a particular reason you want to?" I asked Wallace, and I found the answer he gave to be rather pathetic.
"It's Serena! That nasty old hag is so strict! She keeps scolding me, and complaining that my manners aren't up to snuff! I finally got out of the palace! I'm not just gonna keep living the same life I did back then!"
So he wanted to go back to primary school to get away from Serena. *What an idiot.* Serena wouldn't have had anything to complain about if he would only put a little more effort into his etiquette. She'd scolded me for my unfiltered mouth before, but that was about it.
"This is a good opportunity for you. Why don't you learn some valuable lessons from her over the next three days, yeah?"
"You traitor, Liam!"
"I'm telling you this for your own sake, Wallace."
Knowing me and my moods well, several of my attendants entered the room, bowed to me, then collected Wallace and took him away.
"Nooooo!"
I sipped my tea as I listened to Wallace's fading cries. I'd taken him on as a sort of evil lord's henchman, but it sure wasn't turning out like I'd expected. Lately I seemed to make nothing but miscalculations.

“Incidentally, Master Liam,” Brian informed me, “we received a report that something interesting was discovered on the frontier planet.”
“Something interesting?”
“Yes, sir. It is most likely a replica, created as a sort of good luck charm. How much do you know about planetary development devices?”
Mostly I just knew such devices were used to terraform planets, making hostile worlds habitable.
“I’ve heard some. What about it?”
“Well, the devices used by ancient civilizations were actually more sophisticated than the ones we use now. That’s what our people have discovered, or at least something like it. I know you’re intrigued by mysterious ancient artifacts, so I’ve already had it delivered to the mansion.”
I put a hand to my chin in thought. I’d encountered similar strange discoveries in the past. I felt the Guide had directed me to them, and the alchemy box, for one, had led to me gain vast riches.
“I’ll take a look at it right away. Rosetta, why don’t you rest in your own room?”
“Of course, Darling.”
I stood and started to follow Brian from the room. As I left, I glanced back at Rosetta. She looked a little lonely.
What, did you want to talk to me some more? …Were you really that kind of girl?

***

A green sphere had been delivered to the mansion. It was about the size of a soccer ball, with lines all over its surface that formed an enigmatic pattern. In addition, it gave off a faint green light. The thing was beautiful.
As I gazed at the sphere, mesmerized, Brian explained a bit about planetary development devices.
“When such a device is placed near an inhospitable planet, that planet will become habitable to humans. There are many imitations of ancient devices like this that have been kept by planetary development teams as a kind of good luck charm to ensure success.”
“That’s pretty amazing.”
“However, just as such a device can make a planet bountiful, if misused, it can result in a dead planet. Ancient civilizations left many planets barren in that way, by converting the energy absorbed by the device into elixirs. It’s a rather frightening device, to tell the truth.”
A device like this, if it was authentic, could turn wasteland planets into environments rich with nature’s bounty, but could do the opposite too.
When I touched the globe curiously, its green glow changed to red.
Brian exclaimed, “Oh! It’s unusual for it to glow red like that. Usually, they’re just known to glow green.”

“Oh yeah?”
I mused that this might be a big find, since I felt there was a good chance it was the real deal. As I inspected the device, I recalled the gold necklace I’d obtained in House Razel’s domain. With my curiosity about the necklace renewed, I asked Brian what he thought about it.
“Brian, does this look familiar to you at all?”
“That, sir? Hmm… You seem to attract unusual charms like this, Master Liam.”
“This is another charm?”
“Yes. It’s meant to repel poisons and curses. There are many tales of emperors seeking out such necklaces.”
A good luck charm, eh? I’d been wearing the necklace since I’d come into possession of it, and from what Brian said, it sounded like I should continue doing so. I suspected it might be a present for me from the Guide.
Now then, about this planetary development device…
“Tell me more about how to use this device, Brian.”
When I expressed my interest, Brian smiled and began his lecture.
“I’m delighted you have a thirst for knowledge and adventure, Master Liam. Let’s see… If what I remember from old history books is accurate…”
Soon after listening intently to what Brian had to share about operating this device, I headed right into space.

***

While Liam headed into space, Rosetta summoned Amagi and they sat facing each other.
The beautiful robot in her maid’s outfit was as expressionless as always. “Is there something I can do for you, Lady Rosetta?”
“I’ve learned about Darling’s circumstances from Brian and Serena. His parents abandoned him, and you were the one who essentially raised him… Is that right, Amagi?”
Amagi nodded. “Rather than care for him themselves, Master’s parents and grandparents moved to the Capital Planet, and I was installed here to care for him.” Assuming it likely that Rosetta found her presence unpleasant, Amagi continued. “I am sure you are not pleased by my presence, but I am unable to oppose my master’s wishes. I will endeavor to make myself as inconspicuous to you as I am able.”
Most of those who knew of Liam’s tendency to surround himself with dolls considered it to be his one flaw. Thus, Amagi naturally assumed that she made Rosetta uncomfortable.
Yet, Rosetta’s response to Amagi’s words was unexpected. “Wait… You think I’d complain about something like that?”
“Lady Rosetta?”
Rosetta handed Amagi a present she’d crafted herself. “I learned how to do this in my spare time. It’s the only thing I can give you right now…”

It wasn’t something she bought in House Banfield’s domain or ordered from Thomas. Instead, it was a braided cord she had created out of thread.
“Is it all right for me to accept this?”
“Of course it is! You’re important to Darling, aren’t you?”
Amagi smiled, though the subtle expression struck Rosetta as being a touch sad. “I suppose I must be…” She accepted the braided cord from Rosetta and expressed her gratitude. “Thank you very much, Mistress.”
Rosetta blushed when Amagi called her Mistress. “I-I’m not your mistress yet, Amagi. You’re being a little premature.”
“I suppose you are right.” Amagi bowed her head deeply to Rosetta. As if on some sudden impulse, she added, “Lady Rosetta, please take care of Master.”

***

When people waged war in space, it created a massive amount of junk—space debris—which drifted around freely. The dirty scars of war remained out there indefinitely.
In the Avid, I had come to an area rife with such scars to test out the planetary development device. According to Brian, the device manipulated an environment’s vitality.
“Now, let’s see what happens.”
Inside my cockpit, I touched the planetary development device to activate it, and its glow turned red as the sphere began to suck up the surrounding vitality.
Why was there “vitality” here, anyway? All I could think was that the souls or life energy of the pirates who attacked my frontier planet and were killed out here, drifted among the mangled scrap.
Sucking up vitality and refining it into elixirs was this device’s other function, besides terraforming. I hesitated to use it for such inside my own domain, but against the pirates out here, I had no concerns.
Once the device was finished sucking up whatever residual life energy drifted here with the debris, its light faded. Confirming that it had finished, I inspected the device.
“According to Brian, I just do *this* now…”
As I fiddled with the sphere, red liquid started to pour from it. The liquid spilled onto my lap and instantly hardened into stones, which clattered to the floor. I picked one up and held it close to my eye. I recognized it; this was the crystalized form of an elixir.
“Is this real elixir? That’s pretty amazing. Now I can even make elixirs by myself!”
I gathered up all of the stones I could from the cockpit’s floor, but I had lost sight of a few. However, I only searched for them for a few seconds before realizing I didn’t need to be so desperate. There were plenty more where those came from.

I took out a bottle and poured the remaining elixir from the planetary development device into it.
“How much would this amount go for, I wonder?”
I shook the bottle of elixir. The liquid splashed around inside, then solidified, and then melted into liquid again. A very mysterious fluid indeed. Acquiring this artifact couldn’t possibly be coincidence, or just dumb luck. No, it had to have been predetermined.
“This was the real thing too, and not just some charm. I’ll have to thank the Guide!”
The fact that treasures like these kept falling into my hands was proof that the Guide still watched over me. If I had one lucky charm on my side, it was the Guide himself. If not for him, there was no way I’d be getting my hands on stuff like this as often as I did. I found it amusing that even though I hadn’t joined forces with Derrick, I’d still gotten my hands on a method to produce elixirs.
The Guide must have really been looking after me, carrying through with the follow-up service he’d promised to provide. He hadn’t shown himself lately though.
I wonder how he’s doing… I knew there was no point in *me* worrying about *him*, but I still couldn’t help but think about him a bit. I was sure he was fine, but I did miss him a bit. I wanted to thank him in person for all his help, but I just hadn’t gotten an opportunity lately.
“He was all embarrassed last time I did. Does he just not want to show his face because of that? I think he’s on the humble side.”
Since gratitude was important, the best I could do right now was to will my feelings of thanks to reach him.
“Thank you, Guide. Because of your help, I have even more power now.”
To be honest, though… Even before receiving this mysterious sphere, I hadn’t exactly been lacking in elixirs. Since I’d been making a killing using the alchemy box, I could easily buy elixirs or whatever else I wanted with a ton of cash to spare. Sure, I could make a massive number of elixirs now, but I didn’t exactly *need* to.
“There’s no point in destroying uninhabited planets just to make elixirs. Maybe I should just keep this thing on my fortress-class ship and use it to terraform planets.”
The immense fortress-class ship I’d bought from Nias had proved useful as a mobile defense base. I could station it in orbit around pioneer planets and use this baby to develop them. The standard use for the device was to enrich the vitality of the target area. A planet that already possessed ample vitality made it easier for plants and animals to grow healthy and prosper under the device’s amplifying influence. Terraforming planets was way better than using it to refine elixirs. The device had much more merit to me that way.
“I’ll send this off with the fortress-class as a good luck charm.”

I could just embed the sphere in a statue or something and no one would be the wiser about its effects.
Holding the beautiful planetary development device in both hands, I couldn't help but grin at the Guide's present.
"The Guide works so hard, sending me all this convenient stuff. One of these days, I'll get the chance to thank him to his face again."

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At that same moment, the Guide was on the Capital Planet, spreading his arms wide in glee.
"Mwa ha ha ha! The thousands of years of pent-up negative emotions in this place are filling me with power! The Capital Planet is practically overflowing with discontent!"
The Guide's absorption rate of negative emotions he required for sustenance had plummeted lately, but there was no shortage of them on the Capital Planet. The accumulation of negative emotions over the years was strengthening the Guide. He was beginning to get his power back, but it was still nowhere near what it had been before because Liam's feelings of gratitude constantly sapped strength from him.
"Now I can make that accursed Liam taste hell. Just you wait!"
While he hadn't regained his full power, he still had more than enough by now to resume his efforts to destroy Liam.
"What shall I do first? Should I have the whole universe become his enemy? Wait, maybe I should just put him down with my own hands!"
While the Guide rejoiced over the prospect of destroying Liam, a lurking concentration of light observed him. This light possessed the faint outline of a dog, and it was angry. The animal bared its teeth and silently growled at the Guide.
The dog suddenly looked up.
The Capital Planet was protected by a vast metal globe that encased the entire planet and contained its atmosphere. Nevertheless, through one of the gaps in that enclosing metal, Liam's gratitude came flying in the form of a golden spear, headed straight for the Guide. This shining gold spear plunged right into the back of the maniacally laughing entity.
"Hwaah!" he yelped at the sudden impact. The spear pinned him to the ground. "Wh-wh-what just happened?!"
Confused, the Guide attempted to grip the golden spear and pull it out of his body, but its shaft burned his skin the moment he touched it. Foul-smelling smoke hissed from his hand.
"Aaaah!!! I-is this Liam's gratitude? Wh-why?! I haven't even done anything for him!"
The Guide writhed in pain, pierced by the king-sized manifestation of Liam's gratitude.

“I-it’s draining out of me… All of the power I’d finally gained back… The power I went through all that hard work to gather. Can this really be happening? You… Curse you, Liiiiiaaaaam!”
The Guide hadn’t even done anything this time, but he still ended up being burned by Liam’s feelings of thankfulness.
The dog of light took all this in and disappeared, as if heading somewhere else.

Epilogue

BURNED STRAIGHT THROUGH by the golden spear, the Guide was nearly bursting with a desire for revenge

“I cannot allow him to get away with this. Liam is the first of my victims to make such a fool of me.”

The Guide had never tasted humiliation like this before. Having been cornered, his determination to show Liam hell was now greater than ever. However, there was one problem with that plan. To be perfectly honest, plunging Liam into hell was beyond his abilities right now. Revered as a wise ruler, he had attracted many positive feelings to himself, which were intolerable to the Guide. He was adored and revered by his populace. In his current situation, the Guide could not easily get his revenge on Liam.

Still, he couldn’t just give up. What could he do, then?

“Well, I’m not the only one who wants revenge against Liam. I’ll go find those who share my interest and plant some seeds of vengeance. One of them should sprout eventually.”

With one hand clutching his chest, the pained Guide searched for those with a strong enough will to seek revenge against Liam. He eventually homed in on the strong emanations coming from two particular individuals.

“That’s the way!”

The Guide manifested a door and stepped through it, instantly arriving at the location of one of the people he’d detected.

The person he’d found was Yasushi, who presently stood in an alley at his wits’ end.

“You again?!” the Guide cried when he saw the man.

Yasushi had been Liam’s instructor in the sword style known as the Way of the Flash and was thus inadvertently the very reason Liam had become so powerful. Yasushi had contrived the bogus sword style to con Liam into giving him a position at House Banfield, but somehow, Liam had gone on himself to turn what he learned into something real and formidable.

“I’ll just kill you right now,” the Guide continued to rage at the man. “The only reason I’m in this mess is because of what you went and did, you know!”

The Guide had a certain distaste for Yasushi, whose actions had made Liam so strong. He almost killed the swindler on the spot until he heard what Yasushi was saying and stopped himself.

“What the hell is the Way of the Flash anyway? That bastard Liam has spread my name all over the place now! I’m not letting him get away with this!”

After the primary school’s mobile knight tournament, Liam’s sword style had become a hot topic. Liam had declared himself a student of the Way of the Flash, so curious people had looked into what it was. Who in the world

could Liam have learned his amazing martial arts skills from? As a result, all sorts of people sought out Yasushi now. Some wanted to learn the Way of the Flash from him, while others wanted to defeat him in a duel to bolster their own reputation. Worst of all were the pirates who held a grudge against Yasushi for making Liam so strong. Since they couldn't beat Liam himself, they hunted Yasushi instead. The man's life was now in constant danger, and it was all because of Liam.

The Guide took all this in. It was clear that Yasushi deeply resented Liam.

"Dammit! If I come clean and admit the Way of the Flash is a load of crap, Liam will be furious and want to kill me! But if I don't clear up this misunderstanding, pirates are gonna keep coming after me. What the hell am I supposed to do?!"

As the Guide watched him struggle with his dilemma, Yasushi came to a decision.

"If I don't deal with Liam before he deals with me, he'll come for me himself sooner or later. I'll have to train some new pupils… One won't be enough. What if I had two? If I train them the same way Liam trained, they should come out the same and be able to beat him."

The Guide applauded Yasushi for his plan, though of course, Yasushi couldn't see this or hear his clapping.

"I always knew you had it in you, Yasushi."

Yasushi decided to train two new pupils, and when they were ready, he'd send them after Liam. If that didn't turn out to be feasible, at least his new pupils would be able to protect him from the others who threatened his life.

"It should work, as long as I can find some brats with more talent than Liam started out with… I still have the money I got from him too. Whatever it takes, I'll make them tough enough to go after Liam."

The Guide was in complete agreement with Yasushi's plan.

"Fantastic. I like how you think, Yasushi. Here, have a present from me."

The Guide snapped his fingers and black smoke wafted through the area.

"Here are the talented kids you need. Train them up nice and strong now, Yasushi."

A short distance away, Yasushi heard quarreling voices, and he peered nervously in that direction.

Two children were there, beating up a man who had attacked them. The gangly kids held thick, bloodstained sticks, and the large man had collapsed to the ground. Sensing Yasushi, the children turned their feral eyes on him.

"Eep!"

The children approached him, apparently with the intent of attacking him next.

Though he knew Yasushi couldn't hear him, the Guide coaxed him anyway.

"I found the strongest kids in these parts for you, Yasushi. Make use of their raw potential and make the Way of the Flash real again!"

Yasushi was ready to flee, but he had an idea and hastily took some food out from his pocket, tossing it to the two kids. It was just a cheap pastry he'd been saving to eat later.
Looking at him warily, the kids tore off the pastry's packaging and bit into it like hungry beasts. Watching them as they scarfed it down, Yasushi thought that they might just be the kids he was looking for.
"If these two are trained aggressively, they could surpass Liam, couldn't they? They're just kids, but look how they beat up that big guy! They're obviously quite strong."
When the two kids had finished eating, Yasushi called over to them.
"How would you two like to learn a sword style called the Way of the Flash?"
Satisfied with how the scene had played out, the Guide then headed for the location of the other seeker of vengeance.
"Now, then, who's next?"

***

In an army re-education facility, Eulisia was undergoing retraining.
"Oh," the Guide said to himself, "I've seen this woman with Liam…"
Despite his recognizing her, Eulisia looked nothing like she had before. Her gaze was hard and her beautiful long hair had been cut short. For whatever reason, she seemed to be undergoing harsh retraining to enter a special unit. As the Guide observed her, the mud-stained Eulisia was thrown around by her hand-to-hand combat instructor, but every time, she got back up again.
What had brought her to this? The Guide did a little investigating and found that Eulisia harbored a strong grudge against Liam, deep in her heart. The Guide was impressed with her obsession.
"Does she really have such a strong reason to hate Liam as much as she does?"
The Guide listened further to the voice of her thoughts, and Eulisia's hatred was pleasant to his ears. *This is good hatred,* he thought. It was like listening to one's favorite music.
I'll never forgive him. I'll never forgive him. I'll never forgive him—there's no way I'm ever forgiving Liam.
Already, the woman's negative energy was lending the Guide some strength. In her heart, Eulisia repeated her thoughts of hatred for Liam over and over.
"Wonderful! I had no idea such promising allies were out here. Have a present from me, then. I shall support you in your quest for vengeance."
In order for her to plunge the blade of revenge into Liam, the Guide needed Eulisia to endure this ordeal and grow stronger. So far, she had lost every match against her fighting instructor, doing little more than roll around on

the ground. But now, with a little boost from the Guide, she started to succeed more often.
The instructor commended Eulisia in his tough manner, but it sounded more like a reprimand. “Well, and here I thought all you could do was suck up to people, but I guess you’ve grown a bit, maggot!”
“Thank you, sir!”
On the inside, Eulisia vowed, I will have my revenge on Liam.
The Guide listened to her inner voice and nodded with pleasure.

“Your pure desire for revenge is perfect. I will be cheering you on from the sidelines. I eagerly await the day you enact your vengeance on Liam.”
The Guide did a little investigating of Eulisia and discovered that she was undergoing arduous retraining in various areas, and not just physically. She was studying in a number of specialized fields in order to get ahead in the military and would also be making extensive use of education capsules. However, more training meant more time in which she would be bound to the military. At this rate, she would be serving in a position there for hundreds of years to come.
Yet Eulisia ignored all that and continued to train herself with determination. Her old self, the Eulisia who had planned to use her position as a salesperson for the Third Weapons Factory to meet a noble man to marry, was nowhere to be found. She was now nothing more than a vessel filled with vengeance.
Satisfied, the Guide left her.
“Keep sharpening that blade of vengeance until it reaches Liam one day.”

***

Having taken in the two orphans, Yasushi watched them sleep in a cheap hotel bed while he thought about how to protect himself. His situation had become desperate.
“What do I do if they can’t assassinate him?”
These two kids surely did have some degree of raw talent, but Liam was just so strong. In fact, he had achieved the impossible by turning Yasushi’s simple sleight of hand trick into an actual move, and in doing so had created the Way of the Flash.
“Even if I send the two of them after him, if he turns the tables on them, then he’ll come after me next.”
In that event, he’d be lucky if Liam simply killed him. This was a noble he was dealing with, so who knew what horrible torture might await him. When Yasushi envisioned Liam taking his time to draw out his death, he trembled in fear.
“I-I know! I’ll come up with some other reason for them to fight him, and I won’t even tell them about my assassination plot. Let’s see… When they’re ready, I can tell them to go to my foremost student in the Way of the Flash and challenge him with everything they’ve got.”
For some reason, Liam naively still respected Yasushi. Knowing this, Yasushi would use that trust against him.
“If I sent a letter to him along with the boys that frames their attack as a test by the master, I wonder if that would look legitimate. Or would that not be enough? Well, hmm… I guess I have some things to think over before I send my assassins.”
The first step was to train the feral children in the Way of the Flash. Unfortunately, he knew exactly how to instruct them, and that was how he

had found himself in this mess. He did succeed once already with Liam, after all.
“The question is whether they’ll achieve the same results if I train them the same way I did Liam. In any case, I mustn’t badmouth him in front of them, or it might get out. Yeah, instead, I’ll talk him up to them.”
He saw the absurdity in sending two kids to kill someone he spoke highly of, but in his desperation to protect himself he would embrace even the oddest approach.
All this, just because of the made-up sword school, the Way of the Flash, that Liam had spread word of. Now some people wanted to gain strength just as Liam had, while others wanted to prove themselves by defeating his “teacher.”
No, Yasushi may have made Liam strong, but he was weak, and at least he could admit that to himself. With other strong people chasing him around as they were, Yasushi’s life had become a nightmare. He had no time to be picky about his methods. He had to train these kids as fast as he could.
“Anyway, yes, I’ll have them take a letter with them for Liam to see just in case they fail. Just an innocent test of both of my new students and my top student. He’d believe that, right? He trusts me. What I really hope for, though, is that they’ll take him out…”
Yasushi nodded, glancing again toward his unknowing assassins, looking almost innocent in sleep.
“I’ll raise them to feel indebted to me as much as I can, and get them to take notice of Liam, I guess.”
Yasushi was so lost that even he wasn’t sure what he was doing now.

***

At the military re-education facility, soldiers dropped out one after another, unable to endure the harsh special forces training. Yet Eulisia stayed on, all in the name of taking revenge against Liam.
She looked herself over in the bathroom mirror. She’d cut the beautiful hair she’d been so proud of, and her muscles had grown considerably after all her training. But she hadn’t completely discarded her feminine appeal. The reason for that was simple.
“During my next strengthening session in the education capsule, I’ve got to become more beautiful. After all, this body of mine is yet another tool in my revenge against Liam.”
Liam had been so cold to her and had completely ignored her charms. How, then, would she take her revenge against him? Eulisia had arrived at one promising conclusion…
When Liam graduated from primary school, he would then go on to the military academy, and once he graduated from that, he would begin a period of military service. There, as a noble, the army would assign him an adjutant. The only people chosen for this position were female officers who

were the elite of the elite. Both ability and looks were required in order to be chosen, and for a notable person like Liam, they wouldn't pick just anyone to be his adjutant. This was why Eulisia had enlisted in the special forces.
Once she overcame her severe training and entered active service, only harsh missions awaited her. If she could get through those and earn some impressive achievements, she was sure to be chosen as Liam's adjutant. Finally, she would seduce Liam, and then it would be her turn to reject him. It wasn't as if Liam had exactly "rejected" her, as they'd never been together in the first place, but it was a matter of pride because he'd never given her the chance.
Unbeknownst to him, the Guide's plans and Eulisia's were rather different. Eulisia had no intention of killing Liam, after all. She simply wanted to hurt and humiliate him by rejecting him.
"I will make him take notice of me. I'll have to thoroughly research Liam first."
As she underwent her training, Eulisia was constantly thinking about Liam. At any point, she could have given up this torture and pursued a happier path, but her obsession had its hooks deep in her.
"How should I seduce him, I wonder? I need to find out exactly what he likes."
As Eulisia smirked at herself in the mirror, a colleague of hers entered the bathroom and yelped in surprise at the sight of her.

***

The Guide stood atop a towering building on the Capital Planet.
"I'm going to sow more and more seeds! I just have to believe that one day, one of them will achieve my goal."
I'll leave you be for now, Liam.
"For now, I'll just continue to rebuild my power."
Even now, Liam's feelings of gratitude still burned the Guide's body, but he would absorb all the negative emotions that could be found on the Capital Planet, until such a time where one of his seeds bloomed, and someone took their revenge on Liam for him..

***

The Guide had overlooked them, but there was another group of people who desired revenge against Liam: the Berkeley Family.
In a dimly lit meeting room, the heads of the Family attended a gathering by way of holographic projections. Each member represented was a child of the big boss of the Berkeley Family.
"Well, so, our Derrick has kicked the bucket, eh?"

At the boss' words, the heads all expressed their misgivings about the deceased.
"That little prick lost a planetary development device!"
"Useless bastard."
"He cost us a chunk of our fighting force too. Incompetent to the bitter end."
With one hand, the boss petted a cat-like creature that rested in his lap.
"Well, I'm not going to throw a fit about a precious son of mine being killed. However…" A vein stood out on his forehead, and his tone became more vicious. "There's an idiot out there who picked a fight with the Family."
Liam's face was projected at the center of their circle. When the heads of the Family's branches saw him, they all got vicious looks on their faces too.
"So, the great Pirate Hunter Liam…"
"The kid prodigy who brought House Banfield back from ruin, yeah?"
"Let's just kill him."
The boss slammed his fist down on the table. The cat-like creature was startled, but he petted it again to calm it back down.
"This kid's been a problem for a while now, hunting pirates and such. I've wanted to take care of him for some time, but now that he's picked a fight with us so openly that we can't just sit around anymore, can we?"
In the pirate underworld, there was a massive bounty on Liam, so a lot of hungry bands had gone after him. They all had the tables turned on them. There had been a time when pirates had flooded into Liam's domain as well, but each and every one of them lost. Now, he was so feared that no matter how high the bounty climbed, no pirate gangs tried to challenge him, aside from a few reckless loose cannons. However, even those pirates were erased before they even got close to him.
"This is war between us and Banfield. If you're aware of any nobles who are waiting to see which way the wind blows, find a way to *persuade* them to side with us."
The boss knew that increasing their allies would give them a better chance of crushing Liam. That was proof of just how much of a threat the boy was to him.
"Dad! You don't need to do that! I'll—!"
One of his sons spoke up, to claim he'd handle Liam personally. "Dad, you don't need to do that! I'll—" However, the boss cut him off.
"You want the same fate as your brother, dumbass? We won't be dividing our forces again, the way Derrick did!"
The boss turned his attention back to the hologram of Liam that floated at the center of the holographic gathering and smiled. "Don't think you'll get out unscathed from a fight with the Berkeley Family, you snotty brat."
Unbeknownst to Liam, a great conflict was brewing.

***

Between classes at the primary school's First Campus, sunlight filtered in through the window and I put my elbows on my desk and rested my chin in my hands.
"Why do things never go the way I plan?"
No matter how I thought about it, things were just plain weird.
"Liam, more allowance! Whatever it takes, please give me more!" My lackey, Wallace, clung to me in tears.
Kurt watched him, exasperated. "I see you haven't changed much, Wallace."
Eila had her arms folded as she stared at Wallace in open contempt. "You've used it all up with your fooling around, right? Why don't you just stop wasting money?"
"Shut up!" It seemed Wallace had no intention of heeding their criticisms. "I thought I'd be able to luxuriate a little at Liam's mansion during vacation, but Serena was there, so it was hell! Can't I enjoy a bit of luxury here instead?"
Wallace seemed to get in trouble no matter what he did, but it was all his fault, so Serena could hardly be blamed. I understood her reservations about him. Wallace didn't cause me any particular trouble, but he didn't do me any good either.
Taking on the burden of Wallace had been a miscalculation, but my biggest issue right now was Rosetta. While our group of four sat chatting, Rosetta walked up to us.
"Darling, where will you be eating lunch? The cafeteria?"
I'd thought she was a woman with a steel spirit, but it turned out she was just easy. I was disappointed from the bottom of my heart that Rosetta had fallen for me so easily. It wasn't like I could just get rid of her now. Hence, my current dilemma. I still wanted the position of duke, and I jumped through so many hoops to line that up for myself. Plus, if I tossed Rosetta aside, I'd lose all the trust noble society had placed in me. If Rosetta betrayed me, that would be a different story and I'd be able to cut her loose in an instant, but unless that happened, I was stuck.
"I'll buy some bread at the school store." I explained my plans to Rosetta, and she nodded.
"Bread? Leave it to me. I'll go buy something nice."
Really? Who told you to do that? A noble lady like you, acting like a gofer? You're supposed to have more class than that!
"You don't have to go… I'll get Wallace to do it. Wallace, go buy us some bread."
Wallace brushed the blue hair he was always preening away from his eyes. "No can do. Don't you know how crowded it is there during lunch? All the good stuff gets bought up before I can get to it."
I was utterly disgusted by this former Imperial prince, who wasn't even good for buying some lousy lunch.
Kurt looked at him coldly. "You really are useless, Wallace."
Eila shrugged. "Completely useless."

Wallace was unfazed by their words. “Heh, say what you will, but doesn’t anyone think it’s a little strange for Liam to be telling a former Imperial prince to go buy something for him?”
“Wallace, go buy some for us,” I said to him one more time.
“Seriously, Liam, give me a break. The lunchtime struggle is too stressful for me.”
He’s lying.
“Liar. Whenever I’ve gone into the school store, everyone lined up politely. I haven’t had any problems with line cutters or people pushing, or anything.”
This was a school of nobles, after all. Each and every one of them bought their food with the best of good manners.
Kurt and Eila exchanged a look, then shook their heads in unison.
“That’s because it was *you*, Liam,” Kurt said.
“It’s because you’re scary when you’re mad, Liam,” Eila said.
So the other students were only polite around me out of fear? Well, that was actually amusing…but the problem right now was Rosetta, who was looking rather troubled.
“Umm, so I don’t need to go?”
I decided to give up on it, since it was causing her such consternation.
“We’ll change plans and go to the cafeteria, then.”
“The cafeteria? Leave it to me. I’ll go save us some good seats.”
Seriously, why do you want to be an errand girl so bad? That stuff is only fun if I make you do it… not if you volunteer!
“You don’t need to do anything. Just calm down.”
“R-right. Okay.”
When I saw Rosetta deflate, it made me feel as if I’d done something wrong. I mean, tormenting her had been my big plan since I’d come up with the idea of marrying her, but it was one thing to purposely do wrong and another thing to do wrong unintentionally. This just wasn’t the same.
Despite refusing my simple request a minute ago, Wallace said, “Liam, I want a really special dessert with my lunch…the most expensive thing they’ve got.”
“I think you should just have water.”
Why do I have a lackey who mooches off me? I wouldn’t mind treating him, but not if it feels like he’s just taking advantage of me.
Eila clucked her tongue at Wallace’s selfishness.
She really hates him, huh? I wonder if his personality just rubs her the wrong way.
Eila said, “Why don’t you just eat air, Wallace? I’ll be having that expensive dessert in the cafeteria, though.”
“Aren’t you being a little too mean? Can’t you say something to her about her attitude, Kurt?”
Abruptly dragged into the conversation, Kurt must have decided that he had a few things to say to Wallace too.

“I do think Eila was a little harsh just now, but you should really learn to be better with your money, Wallace.”
“You’re standing against me too! Liam! My patron, Liam! These two are saying unkind things to me! Are you just going to keep quiet about that?”
Here’s my lackey, demanding things of me again, instead of doing anything to earn my help. This isn’t right. This isn’t how I thought lackeys were supposed to be!
“Just shut up and make do with the daily special.”
“So you forsake me, too?”
“Sure would be nice if I could.”
“Huh? Why do you sound so disappointed in me? Are you abandoning me? Are you?!”
Wallace grabbed onto me desperately and I shoved his head away. “Shut up. Get off me.”
Though I acted bothered by him, Eila was downright scary.
“Wallace, get your filthy hands off Liam this instant!”
“Eep!”
Eila started chasing Wallace around the classroom.
I had dreamed of what life at primary school would be like…and my dreams were nothing like this.

***

On the Capital Planet, the prime minister had gathered a group of officials before him. These were the Observers, who watched over House Claudia all these years. A significant number of them had been doing their job for generations, and the current members were all quite dissatisfied.
In front of the lot of them, the prime minister wore a smile.
“Thank you for your loyal service until now. So that you may continue being of use to the Empire, I intend to find a new role for you.”
Naturally, the Observers weren’t happy to hear this.
“Prime Minister!” one of them protested. “We can’t just change things after all this time. At least order us to observe House Banfield now!”
“That’s right!” cried another. “The late emperor’s orders still apply!”
“Please allow us to observe Count Banfield!”
Having done the same job for two thousand years, their group couldn’t accept being told to do anything else. The prime minister understood their feelings, of course. However, these people were nothing but a problem for him now.
“I see. Well, if that’s how you feel, I suppose you’ll just have to die then.”
“Prime Minister?”
Onto a table before him, he threw printouts of the documents the Observers had amassed over years and years, containing all of the dirt they had on various nobles. The Observers’ eyes snapped wide at the sight of the documents.

The prime minister said, “I had no idea you were investigating even me.”
The group specialized not only in tormenting people, but in spying on them as well. There were surely uses for such people, but the prime minister couldn’t trust them now that he knew they’d poked into his own affairs.
“Th-this isn’t what it looks like!”
“Save your excuses. If you lot disappear, I’ll be able to sleep more soundly at night. That’s reason enough for me to want you gone.”
The Observers looked prepared to resist by means of violence, but Tia had been standing off to one side. She drew her rapier, a sword designed for thrusting. In lightning-fast moves, she unerringly pierced the heart of each Observer present before any of them could fight back or flee.
Watching the Observers fall one by one, the prime minister applauded Tia. After the last crumpled to the floor, he said, “Incredible work. I’m sure I can expect much from you in the military academy.”
Tia wiped the blood from her blade and returned it to its sheath, looking down at the sprawled Observers. “It was no trouble. I appreciate the opportunity to clean up these rats who were antagonizing Lord Liam.”
Having opposed Liam, the Observers had not been Imperial officials in Tia’s eyes, but simply enemies.
“So, will you be entering the military academy right away?” the prime minister asked.
“Yes, I plan to start school next year.”
“And what of the count’s plans?” the prime minister continued, as he watched some of his subordinates enter the chamber to clean up the bodies of the Observers. The sight caused him no distress at all, given what he’d learned about them.
As a fourth-year primary school student, Liam’s graduation was approaching. In less than three years, he’d graduate from that school and would have to move on to either a university or the military academy. The prime minister was curious which he would choose first.
“Lord Liam plans to prioritize the military academy.”
“Which means he’ll be going to university after his military training. I wonder if the conflict with the Berkeley Family will be over by then.”
What the prime minister was essentially saying was “Will your fight with the Berkeley Family be okay?”
Tia had no doubts about the outcome in that regard. “Lord Liam will be victorious. In fact, it might be over with rather quickly. You never know.”
The prime minister smiled at her confidence. “I hope that’s true.”

***

At the primary school’s First Campus…
“Aren’t stories of the Knights of the Round Table and the Twelve Knights and stuff like that cool?”
These childish words came from Wallace.

Kurt looked at him with narrowed eyes. “There you go daydreaming again. What’s your big idea this time, Wallace?”
“I just mean, you know, assigning numbers to a team of chosen, talented knights. I read about that stuff in books back at the palace. Don’t you think it’s cool?”
“Those are just comic books you’re talking about.”
Wallace averted his eyes in embarrassment when Kurt pointed that out. Apparently, there were some comics with knights like that in them. In my previous life, Nitta would have read stuff like that. In fact, I read some manga of that type that he recommended to me back then. I guessed that, in the comics in this world, there was a story about twelve elite knights who’d been designated numbers, very similar to a legend from my own world. The king awarded those knights special privileges to elevate them even further.
We were out behind the main school building at the moment, just us boys, discussing stupid things like this.
“Wouldn’t it be a pain trying to find twelve super-strong knights?” I muttered.
Kurt replied, exasperated, “You shouldn’t take anything Wallace says so seriously. Most of his knowledge comes from comics, after all. Anyway, a person could find twelve good people in no time.”
“Really?” I said, surprised by such a statement.
“Well, yeah. I mean, just think about it. For instance, there are plenty of knights back where I come from. It’d be easy to pick only twelve of them, wouldn’t it?”
“But they’re supposed to be exceptionally strong, right? Are there that many really strong knights?”
“Well, it depends on how you judge them, and where you look, but I think there are plenty who could make the cut.”
Now that I thought about it, there *were* a lot of knights out there to choose from, weren’t there? I was sure if I really looked into it, I could find particularly strong individuals among them. Right now in House Banfield, Tia and Marie would qualify.
“I guess I’ll find me some and give them numbers, then.”
Kurt was quick to discourage me. “Don’t do that… We were just talking hypothetically. Giving a small band of knights special treatment could only lead to complications, like resentment from your other knights. Anyway, the Twelve Knights from the comic book Wallace is talking about are the bad guys.”
“Oh? Bad guys?”
I glanced at Wallace, and he looked away from me. It made me change my opinion of him somewhat, if he advocated for a path of evil. I could respect that.
Kurt might have thought it was a bad idea, but I liked it. Those knights were like the evil army in a hero story, right? Like the big four. An evil lord

should have his own little evil knight force, right? I felt I hadn't been doing enough evil lord things recently, but then again, it was difficult to be an evil lord when you were going to primary school.
"The Round Table and the Twelve Knights, eh? Which model should I go with, is the question," I muttered, and in hearing this Wallace raised his hand.
"Liam, someday I want to have my own Knights of the Round Table, so don't pick that one! If we did the same thing, it'd be like you were copying me, and that'd be embarrassing, right?"
Wallace was being self-centered again, not to mention just a little bit unrealistic, if he thought he'd command his own team of super knights some day. Wait though, he'd be embarrassed about us both having Knights of the Round Table, but he wasn't embarrassed to be copying things from comic books?
I decided to come up with more of a plan about my team of elite knights later.
Kurt's shoulders slumped. "You've let him poison you, Liam."
Wallace didn't appreciate Kurt's comment. "That's awfully rude, don't you think?"
As the three of us guys continued chatting, Rosetta and Eila spotted us and waved.
There they go again, getting in the way of our precious guy time.
"Darling! There you are!"
"What are the two of you doing over here?"
The all-too-easy Rosetta, with a big smile on her face, and Eila, who was making it a point to ignore Wallace, came jogging over.
The arrival of Rosetta was particularly problematic. Her smile lit up her whole face, her ringlets bounced as she ran, and the motion made her breasts bounce. It was all so cute, and in this vision, there was no sign at all of the formerly defiant Rosetta. No, the once-proud Rosetta was running over to me like a dog that wags its tail when it spots its master. Being so fond of dogs, that comparison made her all the cuter to me. Yeah, this was a real problem.
"Why did this happen?" I moaned to myself.
"What's wrong, Darling? You're not feeling unwell, are you? Let's head to the nurse's office right away!"
"No, that's not it…"
Rosetta was seriously concerned about me. Of course, if I knew this attitude of hers was just a ruse so I'd let my guard down, then I might be able to enjoy the situation. Unfortunately, there was no indication she was anything less than sincere.
Where, oh where did the steel-willed Rosetta disappear to?

Bonus Story:
The Maids of the Mansion

AT A TIME PRIOR to Liam entering primary school…

One of Liam's mass-produced maid robots, Shirane, busily carried out her duties at the mansion as always. The mansion's human staff feared these maid robots like Shirane, who carried out their work so expressionlessly, because they could never tell what the robots were thinking. Artificial intelligence had long been dreaded in the Algrand Empire, so many people held a strong dislike for robots and AI. As a result, the number of humans willing to interact with House Banfield's maid robots was limited.

As Shirane saw to her work, she overheard a conversation in a neighboring room. The voices, which were probably too quiet for a *human* to overhear, belonged to some of the mansion's human maids.

"Three months from now, the lord will be starting primary school. What should we do?"

Liam's entry into primary school was fast approaching, so lately he'd become the focus of much of their idle chatter.

Shirane continued listening to the maids' conversation while she worked. She could pick out three distinct voices.

"I heard from my father that after he enters primary school, he won't be back for three years, at least. If he doesn't take a break, he might not even come back at all until after graduation."

Liam's noble training was beginning in earnest, and apparently these women found that a matter of concern.

"The lord seems to want to finish his training as soon as possible. After he graduates, he'll probably head straight for university or the military academy. If he does that, he won't be back for decades."

People were long-lived in this world. That meant that the time they spent pursuing education was lengthy too. Liam would likely be back periodically, but when he did return, he was sure to be incredibly busy. And these human maids didn't like that.

Shirane judged that their conversation wasn't anything that might prove defamatory or threatening to Liam.

It's no problem. Nothing that needs to be reported.

The maids were clearly upset about Liam leaving his territory, and Shirane understood the real reason for that.

Some of the fault lies with Master Liam here…

The human maids who worked for Liam were talented women, specially chosen from his domain. Each one had been selected for her lineage, skills, and appearance. Each of them had accepted the work in the hopes that Liam would choose them as his concubine. In fact, many young women applied for work at the mansion every year with the dream of winning that

position. Liam was a figure of great power and respect, the supreme authority in this territory. Therefore, the position of lord's concubine, while not as important as being his wife, would surely rank highly in that territory. Thus, daughters of corporate leaders and officials in Liam's domain—as well as women who had advanced in society through their own merits—flocked to Liam's mansion in the hopes of catching his eye.
Having reached a good stopping point in her work, Shirane's system ran a search for the profiles of the women in the other room based on their vocal identification. Also, since she was linked with her "sisters," the other maid robots of the same model as herself, the information was shared between them. Soon, a long list of comments scrolled through Shirane's vision. She heard these comments narrated in voices that managed to express a lot of emotion.
"Another challenger for Master's heart appears!"
"Personally, I think that one would be smarter if she just gave up."
"Oh? You don't think this girl might have a chance?"
One of the profiles belonged to a young woman from a family that had founded a large corporation. Her grandfather was the chairman of the company, and her mother was the current president. Everything from her family to her personal abilities to her appearance was top-notch. She was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty who was probably hounded by men every day outside of the mansion.
The most recent comment came from "Shiomi."
"I think we've got a winner this time, folks. I'd put her chances of catching the Master's eye at a solid one hundred percent. If I'm wrong, I'll give up my favorite ribbon."
Currency meant pretty much nothing to the maid robots, and they didn't desire luxuries as humans did. Instead, what the maid robots placed value on was the minor accessories that differentiated each of them from all the other identical models. At least visually, this was the extent of their individuality, apart from differing hairstyles.
Amagi, who supervised the maid robots, had a different appearance from the rest of them, so there was no need for her to express her individuality in that way. For the mass-produced units, however, their accessories might literally prove who they were, in the eyes of others. For this reason, they tended not to wear similar types or colors of accessories. Therefore, if Shiomi was willing to wager her right to wear a certain type of ribbon, a sister of hers who had always envied that style might be willing to match her bet. However…
"Shiomi, are you serious?"
"I like your guts for betting on that girl, but you're bound to lose, you know? That's how you lost your braided cord to Arashima that time!"
"I don't understand… Why do you bet when it's so likely that you'll lose?"
The other maids were all the more astonished when Shiomi responded with undeterred confidence.

“The odds aren’t zero. If there’s a possibility, I’ll bet on it. You guys should just worry about what you’ll do when you lose. When I win, I’ll wear all of your accessories at once and emphasize my individuality more than anyone ever has!”

The other maid robots all became exasperated.

Shirane became distracted from her friends’ conversation by another excited exchange between the human maids in the next room. They were now talking about what they might do to market themselves to Liam more effectively.

“Maybe we should just be more aggressive and try talking to him directly?”

“You’ll get in trouble with the head maid!”

“You want to just do nothing, then? If one of us doesn’t nab him in the next three months, all that we’ve done to win this job will have been completely pointless. I for one don’t want that! The only reason I’m working at this mansion is to become a concubine, and I’m not giving up.”

The maid Shiomi had bet on appeared to be highly ambitious. If she were to become Liam’s concubine, she would wield considerable authority in his domain, and so she was desperate to achieve that position.

Shirane’s sisters heard this human maid’s bold statement over their shared network, and it prompted a flurry of excited comments to appear before Shirane’s eyes. The most excited of these comments was Shiomi’s.

“That’s the spirit, girl! Go on the offensive! Seriously, do it! At this rate, the whole bloodline is in danger of dying out anyway!”

For years Liam had been saying that he wanted to create a harem, but he had shown no initiative to actually make one. At this point, Brian and Liam’s other close aides doubted he was even serious about it. As it was, Liam seemed to have no real interest in flesh-and-blood women. Everyone around him, maid robots included, were left agitated with worry. They all wanted Liam to find a human partner. Thus, Shiomi’s bet was largely motivated by sincere feelings.

Just then, it so happened that Liam appeared in that area of the mansion with Amagi in tow. An alert sounded over the human maids’ tablets, and the trio who’d been chatting rushed out into the hallway.

Shirane left her room as well, bowing her head to Liam as he passed by. Liam’s position was such that he should have passed by the servants without saying anything to them, but he ignored the three human women and stopped in front of Shirane.

“Well, if it isn’t Shirane. I’m surprised to see you here. You’re usually stationed somewhere else, aren’t you?”

As a mass-produced unit, Shirane’s appearance was almost completely identical to all her sisters. But for some reason, Liam could tell it was her at a single glance. Plus, he was familiar with all the maid robots’ work schedules.

How does Master know that much about our work?

Shirane honestly thought it was so amazing it was almost creepy.

“M-Master!”
The ambitious human maid Shirane had overheard a few minutes ago had made up her mind to act, and it was she who had just called out to Liam.
Normally, this would have been considered disrespectful, but all Liam did to express his annoyance was narrow his eyes slightly.
“Do you need something?” The one who actually responded to her was Amagi.
The human maid ignored Amagi and continued to address Liam. “It’s good to see you again, my lord. The last time we met was at your coming-of-age party. I attended with my father.”
The maid, having met Liam once before, was desperate to create some sort of bond between them. However, Liam’s gaze wandered from her, and both Amagi and Shirane noted his disinterest.
As she was watching Shirane’s visual information through their link, Shiomi cried out, her voice blasting in Shirane’s mind.
“Nooo! My ribbonnnn!”
Liam didn’t even remember having met this maid. She was a beautiful girl, the sort that you’d expect would remain in your memory if you talked to her even once.
As Liam turned away to resume walking with Amagi, he simply muttered an excuse alluding to how busy he was. “Long time no see. Sorry, no time to chat now… I have to be going.”
He left the maids with a dignified stiffness, but he glanced back at Shirane and gave her a wave.
When Liam had turned a corner in the hallway, the maid who had failed to make anything of her opportunity crumbled to the floor with an empty look on her face.
As she gazed upon this sight, Shirane’s eyes were flooded with Shiomi’s cries and the comments of their other sisters.
“There goes my individuality!”
“Well, look at it this way: an artificial intelligence who likes to gamble on a one percent chance is pretty unique!”
“Are you sure she’s not defective though?”
“Like it wasn’t obvious she’d lose that bet.”
Shiomi had lost her wager, and also her special ribbon.
A comment from Amagi, their supervisor, then appeared on their social network.
“What are you lot doing, making wagers on the master?”
The voice the comment was narrated in was very low and threatening.
The stream of comments abruptly ceased, and the maids all fled in every direction.

***

A month later, Shirane was walking through the mansion's halls when she heard a voice outside a window.
She peered out the second-story window into a courtyard and saw that ambitious maid again, chatting happily with a male knight. They seemed to have a favorable relationship.
Many promising young men gathered at Liam's mansion, and the hopeful maids had opportunities to meet these men too. Having failed to become a concubine to Liam, the maid seemed to have settled on a plain but kind knight instead.
Well, Master didn't choose her, but it seems she's found happiness anyway.
As Shirane turned from the window and continued on her way, she encountered Liam at the end of the hallway. He appeared to have taken Shiomi aside and was talking to her about something.
"Shiomi, what happened to that hair ribbon I used to see you in?"
"I transferred it to one of my sisters, Master."
Shiomi had of course lost it in a bet, but she spoke as if she had willingly given it up.
Liam looked concerned. "Really? You're not being bullied, are you?"
"I am not, Master. There is no problem."
Liam seemed to accept her answer, but perhaps he detected a hint of regret in Shiomi. He removed an accessory of his own from his wrist, a gold bracelet, and clasped it around Shiomi's left one.
"You'll feel left out if you don't have anything distinctive on you, right? Here, a present from me."
"Thank you very much, Master."
Shiomi bowed deeply. Her face showed only the barest of smiles, but her internal reaction was very clear to Shirane, who was presently linked with her.
"Master's bracelet is miiine! You see that, sisters? This is the supreme technique of the brilliant tactician Shiomi—obtaining victory by losing!"

The other sisters were all furious with Shiomi. She lost her trademark ribbon but gained a gold bracelet instead.
“That’s not fair!”
“I can’t believe you would take advantage of Master’s kindness!”
“Shiomi must be what humans call a vixen.”
They weren’t annoyed that she’d obtained a gold bracelet so much as jealous that she’d received it from their master, Liam. Having witnessed this herself, Shirane felt the same way her sisters did. In fact, she was so annoyed she decided to notify their supervisor Amagi.
“Shiomi, you have some repenting to do.”
Liam waved to Shiomi and walked away. Amagi promptly appeared on the scene to take his place.
She walked up to Shiomi and said, without expression, “Shiomi, come with me.”
“Yes, ma’am…”
As Amagi emotionlessly led Shiomi away, the other maid robots clapped and cheered in their social network.
“You sold me out to the supervisor, Shirane!” came Shiomi’s despondent comment.
Shirane commented happily, “Have fun getting chewed out. Be careful… You know how scary she is when she’s mad. She’s very protective of Master, so I hope you’re ready for the nagging!”
When Shirane started laughing loudly in their network, Amagi stopped and looked back with narrowed eyes. “You seem to be enjoying yourself an awful lot, Shirane. How about you come with us?”
Shirane’s gaze wavered for a second, but she gave up on the idea of protesting and followed after Amagi and Shiomi.
Shiomi laughed at Shirane, now walking next to her. *“That’s what you get.”*
“I only said she’s a little scary…”
The maid robots went on to spend another day working without expressing the sentiments in their hearts to any human being.

Afterword

AUTHOR YOMU MISHIMA here.

So, *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!* Volume 3 is finally out, and it's all thanks to your support, readers!

My afterwords are usually short, but they gave me a larger number of pages than usual this time. I'm not very good at these and I'm never sure what to write about. I don't think anyone wants to hear about my personal life though, so this time I thought I'd talk a little about how this work came to be.

I've said these things online and on Twitter, but I'll write it here again for readers who only see my published works. When I first started writing this series, it actually had a different title. In the beginning, it was called *I Reincarnated into a World with an Intergalactic Empire, so I Tried Becoming an Evil Lord!* A title that captured the trends at the time, I guess.

To start out, I decided to just write one chapter and see what happened. At first, I had no intention of continuing it and considered it complete at one chapter. However, I started getting feedback from people who read it online and wanted more. At that time, I was finishing up another series, so I decided to continue with this one. I had other published works too, so I thought continuing this would be a good advertisement for them. Typically, you get more readers when you update web novels, so I thought I would say, "Please read my published works too!" That's right; this series was originally just an advertisement for my other series. It actually ended up being serialized to advertise another book of mine that was being published, not because I was trying to get *this* series published.

I changed the title in the middle of the story and wrote it rather casually. I wanted it to just be a refreshing story as Liam solved more and more problems by accident while he tried to become a terrible villain. I wanted to make it something people could read quickly, just a story about a guy who was a good person in his last life who curses his misfortune and tries to be a bad guy in another world. Unfortunately for him, due to various circumstances, all the bad deeds he tries to commit just cause people to misunderstand, and they think he's a good guy.

It's a work full of misunderstandings, and it became popular enough on the *Let's Be Novelists* website to make it to the top of the daily rankings a few times. But at the time, I wasn't even thinking about this getting published, since I was publishing a few other works with another company. My previous experiences had taught me that stories with robots in them tend to be a hard sell.

I'm sure some readers are thinking, "There are famous works with robots in them, aren't there?" Trust me, it really *is* difficult to get them published. It'd

take a long time to explain why, so I won't get into it here. Just know that it's a fact.
That's why, in the beginning, I never thought this would actually be published, so I wrote it very casually and it was a good change of pace for me. I just went into it thinking things like "What should I have Liam do next?" Or "How would Liam solve this problem?" And "I want to write an even meaner character!" I decided to make the setting really extreme, with battleships thousands of meters long and fleets numbering in the tens of thousands. Like I said, I was writing what I wanted without worrying about the book being published.
Then OVERLAP approached me about turning the story into a novel. I knew it wasn't really suited for it and that it had a lot of characters and humanoid weapons. I thought it would be a lot of work to novelize it. At first, I was like "Huh? Seriously?" but I eventually had to accept that it would become a published novel.
OVERLAP's amazing, huh? They really made this into a proper novel. And now it's even getting a manga! It's practically a miracle.
There were all sorts of interesting things that happened in the novelization process, but I'm starting to run out of space, so I'll leave it at that. In any case, what I wanted to say was that in the beginning, this work was only intended to advertise my other works. That's all you really need to remember.
This ended up taking more space than I thought, but that's basically how this series became published. This series is one that was once finished online and might never have become published like this. It only came about because of the comments I got from people who were eager to read more, so I ended up continuing it. Stuff like that really does happen, huh?
I've had a lot of fun writing this series, so I want to keep working on it. I plan on writing even more stories for my readers to enjoy, so please keep up your support!

Please look forward to
my future efforts.

高峰 ナダレ
NADARE TAKAMINE

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